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MEN BEHIND Fantastic ADVENTURES

Theodore Sturgeon

Author of:

EXCALIBER AND THE ATOM

I DON'T know who's going to find out more about Ted Sturgeon by what follows—you or I. In any case, I appreciate th's opportunity to sound off. There is no one who doesn't dote on capital "I"—if not as a subject, then at least as a theme.

I was born overseas, on February 26, 1918, which makes me older than I ought to be according to the way I act. Place: Staten Island, which is Richmond County and the forgotten borough of New York City, on which to this very day, you can milk a cow and get lost in the woods. My mother

(*Continued on page* 127)

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Illustrated by H. Dorset

From the days of King Arthur's Court comes Merlin—with a potion of murder and magic to pit against modern science and the Atom. Can his weird and unholy purpose be thwarted?

WITH THIS RING . . . (Short—3,100) ..... by Dallas Ross 52
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It takes so little to be Emperor of a world: just a twist of the finger... But unfortunately, you always have to go home for dinner. At least, that's what Newton Brown thought . . .

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Everything was fine until you went beyond the invisible barriers of this very strange and mysterious planet. Then it was a case of Man eat Man—and heaven save you from indigestion!

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How would you feel if suddenly hundreds of luscious females ran panting after you? Would you just blissfully make up for all the lost years—or begin to wonder what was in that bottle?

THE MAN WITH THE CLUTCHING HAND (Short—3,000) by Paul W. Fairman 94
Illustrated by Dan Barry

It seems it should be so simple to trace him—the little guy with the derby and the malformed hand. But first, of course, you have to know if he really exists. Maybe you just made him up...

VERY COLD FOR CONQUEST (Short—7,000) ..... by P. F. Costello 102
Illustrated by Lawrence

Can a ghost of the future also be an apparition from the past? The weird looking ship adrift on the Caribbean Sea should be able to answer that question. But the ship's not there...!

Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones suggested by a scene from "Excalibur and the Atom"

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

THAT TIME of the month is here again—the time that every editor postpones until the last possible minute. It isn't that we don't enjoy our monthly chats with you. We do. It's just that getting started on this page is usually the toughest assignment to tackle in putting out the entire magazine. After all the pencils are sharpened and all the nice clean white bond paper has been laid out, after the typewriter has been thoroughly cleaned—then what?

WE COULD digress for a bit on Hollywood's science-fiction-fantasy activities, like the recent RKO release "The Thing". At the risk of bringing tons of abuse down on your editor's old gray head, we stand on record as saying we were a bit disappointed in this so-widely ballyhooed thriller.

THE COMPLETELY authentic sets, using no tricks and no obviously fake scenery, are one of the points in its favor. The acting for the most part was good. In a few instances, the suspense was terrifying.

BUT BY and large, we found nothing new in this film version of John Campbell Jr.'s classic, "Who Goes There?". There was nothing in "The Thing" that hasn't been covered many times before, many years before. All the elements of dramatic fiction which it contained have appeared in any of the old Frankenstein and Dracula movies, and in "The Cat and the Canary", "The Were-Wolf of London", and even in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde". As for suspense, all these old thrillers surpassed it. In "The Thing", up until the time the monster was revealed, the suspense reached a high pitch. After that, except for one or two instances, the suspense didn't hold.

THE OUTSTANDING points about this film were its factual approach, its tight plotting, and its really excellent characterizations. For this, our hats are off to Howard Hawks and RKO.

ALTHOUGH it's not fair to make comparisons on two entirely different types of movies—the documentary versus the straight science-fiction—at this point, "Destination Moon" still remains our favorite.

WE COULD digress, too, on the fact that science-fiction-fantasy is really on the bandwagon now. That many of the top slicks are devoting articles to it—as the one in LIFE last month—that many of the recognized top slick writers are beginning to use this background. There has been comment made that science-fiction-fantasy is the only truly American original literature. To this, we take exception. We feel that this country has added much to the literary field—and that stf, while our particular baby, cannot carry the banner of honor alone. We hope that the new recognition now being fostered on stf will not encourage too much change in the type of stories which have brought about this recognition.

IT IS OUR experience that being in the limelight changes one, and not always for the better. So we entreat our writers, and our readers, not to go too far afield—not to take too seriously what was originally meant to be pure escapism.

IT IS GOOD to note, too, that many of the old dyed-in-the-wool western and detective fans are finding their entertainment today in the action science-fiction-fantasy yarns. The reason for this? In the standard western and detective story, the author is limited in his background. Whereas in science-fiction-fantasy, the author has a range of background almost beyond conception, in which he can lay his story, move his characters about, and still tell the same basic story that the western and detective writer tells.

AS AN ILLUSTRATION, note particularly the lead story in this issue: "Excalibur and the Atom". In addition to the unlimited background which the author made use of, he was also able to include as integral parts of his plot, variations of the legendary King Arthur tales plus the popular private eye of today.

NEWS FLASH: What's behind any great man's success? Brains—luck—opportunity? Or....? If you want the answer, don't miss Paul Fairman's lead story in the September issue of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES*—"The Terrible Puppets". You may be surprised at what you'll learn!

AND SO another editorial goes to press. See you next month. ..... LES

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BUILT FOR ACTION!

BY

John Weston

A NEW PHILOSOPHY is overtaking American engineers and designers, one which will have far reaching repercussions in the future. It is something we have all been aware of subconsciously, yet have rarely taken note of. It is based on the fact that when you make or manufacture something, make it good enough for the job, but don't waste time, material or energy—they are too precious.

Every designer is confronted with the problem of making his product strong, long-lasting, fitted to the job, and esthetically appealing. This last motive is a tricky one. And it's the one which is least valuable and most time-consuming. In order to get people to buy something you've got to make it attractive.

But there are many fields in which look-appeal doesn't apply, but through habit the designers have still applied the look-appeal principle with the result that it wastes countless man-hours and countless amounts of materials.

Consider, for example, the man designing nineteen fifty-five's new tank. When he writes up the specifications for components, almost invariably he calls for safety factors and surface finishes which are completely unnecessary in light of the probable life of the vehicle. In other words he builds into the thing values which are completely wasted. This is especially true of military designers but it applies to builders of the most humble things. The added cost of the items then comes out of the users' hides.

The future will change this, for American know-how has learned something from European practice. We can teach them when it comes to mass production but they in turn can teach us when it comes to design. When you examine two similar items, machines especially, one made here and one made there, invariably the American device when taken apart will look better finished than the European; the components will be neat and trim and in many cases stronger. But in terms of the expected life of the machine, the American trim will be simply a waste of time and effort. This has been especially noted when comparing weapons, tanks, guns, motors, etc.

Fortunately, we are copying from the competitors' notebooks. We are willing to learn. When you get your model 'Fifty-four helicopter, examine the engine. The motor block isn't mirror polished, but it'll really do the job!

ICE-BOX OF THE WORLD

BY

Peter Dakin

CONTRARY to popular concept, the coldest spot in the world is not at the North Pole, but in the Taiga country located 1,400 miles from the North Pole, in north central and northeastern Siberia. The city of Verkhoyansk in eastern Siberia has the distinction of registering the lowest natural temperature ever recorded—90 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit.

Queer things happen at this degree of intense cold. Over the years, stone and silt accumulate on the ice, completely hiding the ice core, and there results a peculiar land formation whose central core is ice.

If this part of the world should ever become warm for any length of time, and the inside ice were to melt, islands would fall apart and "melt away". Of course, at 90 degrees below zero, ice is like stone and snow is like table salt. If there is the slightest breeze, your breath will make little crackling sounds as it freezes and floats away. If you run and get out of breath at this low temperature, the air will coat your lungs, causing intense pain. If you stand still without the proper clothing and protection, you will be a stone corpse in five minutes. At this temperature, rubber becomes as brittle as thin glass and mercury becomes every bit as hard as steel.

Although we temperate zone-dwellers couldn't stand this cold, it does have some advantages over our climate. It's almost impossible to catch cold or to get any other germ disease, because most germs cannot live in such extreme cold. Also, the Byrd expeditions proved that food could be kept for many years without spoiling.

The reason for this climate is due to a very high mountain range on the south of the Taiga country. Warm winds from the south are cut off while the intense cold from the Arctic regions sweeps down on the unprotected side. The city of Verkhoyansk is in the center of all this, and therefore it gets a great deal more than its share.

A remarkable and almost incredible fact is that this Russian city is hot in the very short summer it has, and the thermometer often reaches 80 above zero. This makes Verkhoyansk the city of greatest extremes in temperature in the world—ranging from 80 above to 80 below in a typical year.

We'll take California!

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They say a private eye can handle anything from a bottle to a blonde. But when Merlin came in with a sword, things began to pop!

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As the chanting around them reached a crescendo, the knife moved up and sliced off the branch

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IN A FACE that was a statement of strength, two deep lines formed parentheses. They enclosed a mouth that was a big gentleness. Into the mouth he thrust the soggy end of the pretzel stick he had been dunking in his coffee. He grunted. The classified ad read:

Lose something? Or maybe you want something found. Or maybe you just want something. Convince me it exists, pay my expenses, and I'll charge you a fee for finding it. Hadley Guinn, HE 6-2420.

"A hell of a way to get business," he said to the coffee container. It had two flyspecks and a brown stain that together looked like a grinning rat. "Go ahead," he growled. "Laugh."

She came in then, straight through the waiting room into his office. "Hadley Guinn?" She had a voice to go with olive skin, the kind with a glow under it.

"You read signs on doors?"

"I still have to ask questions. You forgot to wear your dog-tag." She came forward and sat down. She moved across the floor as if she were on tracks. She sat down as if she were folding wings.

"Have a wet pretzel?"

"Thanks, no. I just threw one away." She regarded him evenly. She had not smiled, she had not raised a brow or arched a nostril. She was everything in the world that was completely composed. She was about twenty, with blue-black hair. Her blue eyes didn't belong with that complexion at all. They didn't belong with her age either. They were wise eyes. They were ten thousand years old. She wore a black dress with a built-on cape around her shoulders and a neckline down to here. She used a brown-red lipstick that went with the skin but not at all with the eyes or the dress. On her it looked fine.

"Reckon it'll rain tomorrow?" he asked eventually.

She took the remark at face value. "Not in Barenton."

"Where's Barenton?"

"Sorry," she said. "Classical reference. There's a hawthorne bush there."

"Would that be the one you're beating around?"

The thick lashes did not bat. "You can find anything?"

"I'm near enough to being legal to be able to handle the language," he said. He quoted: "'Convince me it exists...'"

"I see. If it's too much trouble, you're not convinced."

He quoted: "'...pay my expenses...'"

"Mmm. And then the fee comes automatically."

"When I find it. You examine more clauses than the guy who manicures for Clyde Beatty."

She said, deadpan, "That job really gives one pause."

HIS APPRECIATION was in his eyes and in the parentheses. He left it there. "It was nice of you to drop in, Miss Jones."

"Morgan," she said.

He drained the container, crushed it, filed it in the wastebasket. He swept the remaining pretzel sticks into the drawer. "Lunch time's over," he explained. "Shall we dance?"

"Not while we have to watch our steps.... What's your special signal that means you're about to go to work?"

"I answer a businesslike question."

She nodded. "Want to find something for me?"

He waited.

She said, coolly, "Want to find something for me if I convince you that it is, and pay your expenses?"

He said nothing.

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"In advance?"

"Certainly," he said.

"Very well. I'm looking for a stone. It's a big one—seven or eight karats. Not a diamond. A diamond looks like a piece of putty beside it. It glows in the dark."

"Where is it?"

She shrugged.

"Well, is it loose, or in a ring, or what?"

"It's on a cup. It looks like gold, but it isn't. The cup holds about a quart, and it has a five-sided pedestal and a five-sided foot."

He closed his eyes, looked at the mental picture her words drew, and said, "Got a lead?"

"There's a man in town who almost had it once. His name's Percival."

Guinn reached under the desk and scratched his lower shinbone. "You mean the Caveman?"

"That's the man."

"Hell. He doesn't have any use for baubles. He doesn't even believe in money."

"You meet all kinds of people," she said gently.

"All right. I'll go see him. What else do you know about this cup?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Where did it come from? Where was it last seen? Why do you want it?"

"No one knows where it came from. The stone is supposed to have come from the sky. The cup was made in the Middle East more than two thousand years ago. It's been seen only twice, and that was too long ago to bother about. I do know it's been seen near here. As for why I want it. . . ." The wise eyes looked deep into his. "I want it very badly," she whispered.

THE INTENSITY of her gaze, of her voice, gave him a genuine shock. It was the first break in her incredible composure, and he hadn't been ready for it.

"I'll look for it," he said.

She stood up. "Here's five to start with."

He watched her open her purse. "Five? Don't knock yourself out, Miss Morgan."

"There'll be more when you need it," she said. She put five bills down on the desk. They were C-notes.

"It's that important?" he asked.

"At least that important," she said soberly.

"Guys get killed over things that important."

"Lots of guys have gotten killed over this." She looked at him for a moment. "Shall I pick up those bills now?"

"Allow me," he said graciously. He scooped them, stacked them, fingered his smooth brown wallet out of his hip pocket and slipped the money into it. "Now tell me more."

She looked him straight in the eye and shook her head very slowly, twice. Her eyes, her wise eyes, slid in their long sockets as her head moved. "It's your cooky, Guinn."

He shrugged. "You're just going to make me use up more of your expense money. What's your first name?"

"Morgan."

"All right, if you don't want to tell me. Where can I get in touch with you?"

"For the time being," she said coolly, "I'll worry about that." She stood up. "Be careful."

"Should I really be careful?"

"I keep telling you," she said, "this job isn't just difficult." She turned and walked out.

When she got to the outer door he called her: "Miss Morgan!"

"Yes?"

"Goodbye."

She set the shoulder-strap of her

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bag and passed the doorknob from one hand to the other as she sidled through it. "You're so formal," she said, and was gone.

GUINN SAT staring at the door. His face was completely impassive; he was suddenly conscious of it, that he was imitating hers. He grunted loudly, spread one big hand and drummed the desk top, once. Then he rose and walked to the window.

He saw the girl called Morgan crossing the sidewalk. He knew how women walked. He'd never seen one move like this. He wondered some things about her and then felt his wallet without taking it out. He bent it; his sensitive fingers could feel it crackle. They were nice new bills.

He shook his head and went back to the desk. From the second drawer he took a shoulder harness and strapped it on. In the middle drawer were two guns. He took the dull-grey .32 and slipped the magazine out. He ejected the shell that was in the breech, pressed it into the magazine and, holding the cocking-piece back, twisted the breech-block and broke the gun. He sighted the bore to the window, nodded, and deftly put the gun together again, returning the top cartridge to the breech. He dropped it into the holster, picked up the other gun, thought for a moment and then put it back. It clinked. He bent, peered, palmed out a four-fifths of rye. He sighted it exactly and as carefully as he had the gun-bore, then put it back in the drawer.

He went to the door, felt for his keys, thumbed the spring catch. The bolt shot out with a disapproving *tsk!* He pulled at his square chin, returned to the desk, opened the middle drawer again and found an unpaid telephone bill in a well-thumbed envelope. He took out his wallet, put three of the C-notes in with the bill, and dropped the envelope back in the drawer. He felt the bottle staring at him, muttered, "If that's the way you feel," and resentfully drank from it. There were only a couple of fingers left. Then he went out and slammed the door behind him.

It wasn't quite two o'clock.

THERE WAS A two-year-old station wagon on the street that looked as if it had run two hundred thousand miles and rolled sidewise the last four. A lean youth sat on the front fender with his feet on a fireplug. On the pavement by the plug were four dog-eared cheesecake magazines.

Guinn asked him, "What goes, Garry? You take the pledge?"

The youth looked down at the magazines. "Those I don't need," he said, and flashed a sudden, loose-lipped grin. He had clumped hair that looked like the oozings at the top of a cotton-bale, and steel-grey eyes that were very pale pink all around the edges. "I just seen a chick, hey. She has hair like this, see," and he made a motion as if he were saluting with both hands at once, "and it's so black it's blue. She's stacked like wheatcakes, but with honey. Mostly, she's got a face like a pyramid."

"You mean a sphinx."

"Same thing. So why should I look at pictures? Hey—you know her, hey?"

Guinn reached in through the window of the station-wagon and opened the door. "A client." He got in.

Garry trotted around the street side, grasped the window-frame, and pulled. The door opened and sagged. He got in, lifted the door and pulled it until it latched, and tramped on the starter. The motor responded instantly

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and quietly. "Yeah, huh," said Garry enthusiastically. "What's she want?"

Guinn said shortly, "Just because this wagon's a dog doesn't mean you have to keep it by a hydrant all the time. Let's go."

The car moved forward. Garry said "Is she—"

"Take the hill road and turn off at the Spur."

Garry nodded. "Will she—"

"I changed the subject twice," said Guinn.

Garry tightened his lips and raised his eyebrows in a facial shrug. Guinn sat silently, his big hands lax on his knees, his eyes on the road.

After a time he said, "I mean that about the fireplugs."

"Well," said Garry, "I got to have some place to put my feet."

"Put 'em in your pockets."

About two miles further on Garry asked, "Now, how am I going to do that and keep my pants on?"

The two lines at the corners of Guinn's mouth deepened. Suddenly he straightened. "Slow down."

THERE WAS A girl on the road, hobbling painfully along toward them. Guinn said, "That kid's hurt... no; busted a heel off. Stop, Garry."

He leaned out. "Something wrong, sister?"

She made no effort to approach the car. "I'm all right." She wore a strapless sun-back dress that flared out at the hips. She was a copper-blonde, with angry green eyes. Her left hand clutched the top hem of the dress; in her right she held a limp handbag made of the same purple linen as her dress.

"The hell you are," said Guinn. He peered at her. "Don't I know you? Your name's...Lynn."

She sighed and crossed the road shoulder. "That's right. I deal off the arm at Crenley's Cafeteria. You're that detective in the Miles Building."

"What's the matter?"

The slight identification seemed to make a large difference. She came close to the car. She wiped her brow with the back of the hand that held the bag. "It's real hot," she said with a small smile, as if apologizing for the weather. "Oh, I just guessed wrong. Day off, fellow says it's a nice day for a spin, get 'way out in the country, and suddenly I get an offer. Or walk." She shrugged, clutched tighter at her neckline. "I walked."

"There was some wrestling," said Guinn.

"Uh-huh. Tore my dress, the stinker. For that I wiped off his collarbone with his ear."

"Good." He looked at his watch. "I don't have much time to run you back in. Have to spend most of the afternoon up on the Spur. But I should be back in town before seven. You're welcome to come along."

She hesitated, looked down the hot, dusty road toward the town and then at the inviting shade inside the station wagon. Then, "Why not?" she said. "I'm off till tomorrow. Gosh, thanks, Mr. Guinn."

HE REACHED back and opened the door and she climbed in. Garry let in the clutch. Lynn said, "That feels good, that breeze."

Guinn fumbled in the glove compartment. "There ought to be—yeah—here it is." His hand closed o' a small plastic case which he passed back to the girl. "Sorry I don't seem to stock your color."

"Wh— Oh! A needle and these little rolls of thread. You are a Boy Scout!"

"Yeah, huh," muttered Garry.

Lynn said, "Don't look around, will you? I'm not...not wearing anything.

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under this, and if I'm going to sew it from the inside I'll have to pull it right down."

"Go ahead," said Guinn.

They bowled along in silence through the hot afternoon. The right-hand wheels rumbled on the shoulder, sang again on tarmac. They rumbled again. Guinn looked up sharply to see Garry's eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror. He reached up and turned it on its swivel and with the same movement snapped his thumbnail so hard on the bridge of Garry's nose that tears came to the driver's eyes. Neither man said a word, and Lynn was apparently too busy to notice.

They turned off on the Spur road and began to climb. At the second hairpin the blacktop ceased. At the fourth there were no more retaining walls. At the seventh the road had yielded up its last cottage driveway and was a two-track meander through neglected hilltop fields. In the middle of one of these Garry stopped the car.

"More?"

"Go ahead," said Guinn.

"You know," said Garry resignedly, and inched over the track until the car poked its battered snout into woods. Garry glanced at Guinn, who sat as if in deep thought and gave no orders. The car moved through underbrush and there, abruptly, was the track again, winding through the woods.

"Oh, how lovely!" said Lynn.

IT WAS CERTAINLY restful; an underwater-green light, sun-spangled in shifting patches of gold.

"Whoa."

There was a glitter of chrome ahead, as offensive as a belch in a theater audience. Garry braked. Guinn stared thoughtfully at the low-slung Town-and-Country convertible which blocked the track a hundred shaded yards ahead, and at the gray rock outcropping beyond it. There was a flash of white; a baby goat curvetted on the rocks, then another and another.

"Pull 'way over," said Guinn. "Far enough so that Chrysler can get out if he wants to. But keep your eye on him."

There was a sound from Lynn—a quickly checked almost-syllable. Guinn swung around.

She was staring at the convertible, sitting bolt-up-right, and her green eyes were round. "What is it, Lynn?"

"I could be wrong, but I think that's the—the fellow who—"

"We'll take care of him."

"Oh, please. I don't want any trouble."

Garry turned around and said jovially, "Oh, it won't be any trouble, miss."

He tooled the car between the trees and got it off the road. Guinn watched him narrowly. He'd known that combination of joviality and slitted eyes from 'way back. "Garry—"

"I don't like to see women pushed around," said Garry. He switched off.

Guinn got out, closed the door, leaned his elbows on the window ledge. "Lynn..."

She took her apprehensive eyes from the convertible. "Mmm?"

"You'll be all right with Garry. He's harmless. He likes to look, but he's afraid to touch." He thumped Garry's shoulder. "If anyone shoots at you," he told him, "try to catch the slug in your head, where it won't make any difference."

Garry laughed with the same ominous cheerfulness. "How soon'll you be back?"

"Shortly." He turned away and struck into the woods at about forty-five degrees away from the road.

He worked his way carefully, keeping a constant watch on the conver-

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tible and on the area between it and the rocks. Nothing moved. There was no one in sight in or around the Chrysler when he drew ab east of it. He made no attempt to get closer, but moved steadily toward the rocks. Once he stopped and listened. He made another fifty feet and stopped again. There was a high, thin cry, faint and close. It sounded like a hoarse-voiced three-year-old child repeating a single vowel-sound: *Ei-ee! Ei-ee!*

HE STEPPED into the clearing around the rocks. Out of the corner of his eye something dark flashed out of sight around a projection in the grey stone.

Guinn slid back into the brush and waited. He reached inside his jacket and fingered the butt of his .32.

The black thing barely showed, disappeared again.

Hollow, faint, near, insistent came the childlike *Ei-ee̅...ei-ee...ei-ee...*

Guinn lifted his gun, kicked off the safeties, crouched lower.

Explosively, the black thing leaped out into the open. Guinn's breath caught in his throat and he quelled the trigger reflex of his right hand by an enormous application of will. A black goat kid pranced into the open, ran and leapt high over some invisible obstacle created in its own fantastically playful imagination, hit the ground with all four feet together, back arched, head down. It gave an infantile snort and raced away, its little hooves making astonishingly soft little sounds on the rocks, like a cat's feet on parquet flooring.

"Percival!" Guinn called.

Ei-ee...ei-ee...

From the woods came the sound of a starter. Not the station-wagon, for the motor turned over all of four times before it caught, a delay that Garry wouldn't stand for in anything he drove. Must be the Chrysler.

Guinn hesitated only a second, recalled that Garry was between the Chrysler and the outside world, then stepped out into the clearing. He heard the convertible grind into reverse, cut into low and then a dwindling second. He shrugged and moved across to the rocks and around them, swiftly and watchfully. Nothing moved. Somewhere a goat bleated, and another answered.

Then there was a wide cave-mouth.

"Percival?"

No answer, except that repetitive, high-pitched cry.

Guinn ducked into the cave and sprang to one side, feeling for that silhouetted second like a towed artillery target. A sixth sense told him there was nothing human inside. He shut his eyes tight as if to squeeze the residual sunlight out of them like some dazzling juice.

AT LAST HE could see. Book rack. A hard mattress on the scrupulously levelled and swept clay floor. Goatskins. And back in the corner, something small and white that wept and wept.

He crossed, knelt beside it. It was a newborn goat kid, a day or so old, its wobbly and beseeching head stretched toward the light.

He patted its neck and it slapped his wrist with a tongue as rough as a finishing rasp. Then he flicked his gaze over the cave again. He ran his hand over the books, glanced at their titles. Krishnamurti, Malory, Tennyson, Gibrahn, Swedenborg. White's *The Sword in the Stone,* C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength.* Theosophy, anthropology, *Ancient British Landmarks.*

"Busy boy," he muttered. He turned to the mattress, touched it.

It was wet.

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He could detect, as he bent over it, the acrid, not unpleasant odor of fresh clean perspiration. He threw off the shaggy goatskin. Under it the mattress was sopping. But this wasn't perspiration.

It was blood.

"*Ei-ee...*" mourned the kid.

"Hold tight, baby," he soothed. He knelt and scrutinized the floor carefully in the band of sunlight which streamed in through the cave-mouth.

"Um—hm!" Blood again; a spot, a starred droplet, a smear. Once he had seen them it was easy enough to follow them outside ("I'll be back, baby," he told the kid), across the clearing, through a band of woodland (where, on a flat rock, there was a full scarlet handprint) and into the meadow behind the outcropping.

The goats were there, massed together like a bed of flowers, their heads all turned toward him, their eyes like shining seeds. He stopped, and here a head fell, and there, and one by one they began to graze absently. But none of them wandered far from the still figure on the grass.

He went to it and the goats fell back before him, warily and attentive.

Percival lay face downward on the grass. Guinn knew it was Percival because of the single length of white linen wrapped around his waist, and because of the tumbled grey shoulder-length hair. The hair had blood on it.

He turned the body over, and Percival moaned. He wasn't dead, and that, under the circumstances, was a pity.

Guinn took out his carefully folded display handkerchief, shook it open, and wiped out the blood-filled eyes. "It's Hadley Guinn," he said softly. "You'll be all right now."

"Mo," whispered Percival. No one could have made an 'n' sound from a mouth and tongue in that condition.

"Who did it?"

PERCIVAL BREATHED deeply, twice, and his eyes began to glaze. Guinn shook him, almost roughly. "You've got to tell me who did this to you." He turned the handkerchief, dabbed very gently at the tattered mouth.

Slowly the eyes regained some life. "Gwim?"

"Guinn, yes; Hadley Guinn. I'll help you, Percival. Who did this to you?"

"G w i m...g o o' boy, Gwim." He coughed. Guinn caught the blood. "Who...fent...oo?"

Guinn closed his eyes and ran over forty possibilities. Then, "Who sent me? Never mind that, Percival, man. Tell me, you've got to tell me—"

Percival tossed his head impatiently. "Who? Who?"

"All right. It was a dame called Morgan."

The painful distortion of the wrecked mouth might have been a smile. Percival nodded. "Gh-h-issen..."

Guinn translated this as listen... "I'm listening, Percival," he said softly.

Percival's gnarled hand came up, pointed. The sharp old index finger dug into his knee to punctuate the crippled, halting speech. "...hynd guh ghuid umgh-ozhiush..."

Watching those tortured eyes, Guinn felt grief and panic mount. He tried. He tried desperately hard. "Wait: you say hy...hie...fi...*find*...guh ...duh...the? *The. Find the.* Find the what, Percival?"

"Ghuid...Dhuid..."

"Doo-id? D...Druid? Is it *Druid,* Percival?"

Percival nodded weakly, rapidly. His hand patted Guinn's knee as if in vast approval. "Um...amgh-

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ozhiush."

"Amgh...Amgrozhi-ess..."

Percival spread his hand in a helpless gesture. Guinn said, "Was that close? Is that almost it, Percival? *Amgrozhi-ess?*"

Percival nodded weakly. Guinn could all but see his soul leaving his body. "Who did it? Who, Percival—who?"

"M-m-m..."

"Please, please...try."

"Mugh-gug."

"Mur...murdered. Murdered. Yes, Percival—who did it?"

"M-m-m..."

GUINN PUT the great head down softly and stood up. He hurt. He hurt away down inside where his roiling anger lived—way under anything he could control.

He hurt enough to measure his wonderment when as a kid with a dog he had run into Percival and his goats; when he used to sit in the cave and hear that great rolling voice tell tales of ancient times, and the gods men worshipped when the world was younger, when faith had the place that knowledge has now. There were great tales of the future, too, when the reverence now given knowledge will be replaced by understanding.

He hurt enough to measure his delight when Percival would gravely give him his choice of goat's milk or turnip juice to drink, and when the hermit gave him a great white ram's skin for his own. (It lay over the foot of his bed to this day.)

He hurt enough to measure his shame when as an enlightened teenager he had been part of a gang that went up to jeer and throw mud at the "nekkid looney". (For Percival lived naked in the warm weather and in goat-skins in the cold, always courteously donning his strip of linen when anyone came by.) They'd taken pictures and had themselves a hell of a laugh over it; and Guinn couldn't live with it and went up to apologize, and the hermit greeted him as a friend.

Percival was part of the mountain—part of the world. He was part of a very real world of rocks and flowers, wind and winter and eternal wildness—a world on which chrome and neon and nuclear energy and power politics grew like acne on a great calm face. He had never done harm to a living soul. He had never sought a human being out nor turned one away. He was on the mountain when Guinn was born and he should have been there when Guinn died, because he was part of the eternity that every man should have, somewhere, to turn to when he needs it.

Something died and was born in Guinn as he stood looking down at the great torn face. "Take care of him," he said to the goats. "I'll send somebody up..."

From the cave the kid cried and cried.

"Oh, yes, baby. You've got it just right."

He scooped up a startled nanny and headed for the cave. As he reached the entrance he heard a shot from the woods.

"Sorry, lady," he said. He flung the nanny through the cave-mouth with one fluid sweep of his two arms, hoping against hope that she and the kid would get together, and sprinted for his car.

As he passed the place where the Chrysler had been parked there was another shot, and the moan of the Town-and-Country's motor. He pounded up to the station-wagon just in time to see the convertible break through the underbrush and disappear into the meadow.

Lynn was gone. Garry lay beside

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the car. There was a hole in the side of his head and another at the back, and he was very bloody.

GUINN WAS around at all largely because he had the knack of selecting priorities among simultaneous emergencies, and because, having been born with the knack, he'd spent most of his life developing it.

When he knelt beside Garry's body he knew he had feelings about it, but he filed them away for later. The priority he noticed immediately was a smell and a sound; a steady trickle of liquid on dead leaves, and the acrid fumes of gasoline.

He dropped to his belly and looked under the car. A stream of gas the size of a lead-pencil was flowing out of the tank. He pulled himself up by a doorhandle, opening the door as he moved, scooped up the rear seat and got a folding bucket from under it, and ran around to shove it under the tank. He felt the hole, a jagged oval rip cut by a .32 or something larger.

"Don't go away," he said to Garry.

He opened the right rear door, pulled at the scarred upholstery. It came off its snap-fasteners with a sound like teeth going into peanut brittle. In the shallow space between upholstery and the outer panel were row on row of parts, neatly clipped with spring clamps. There were spark plugs, three spare distributor caps, ignition wire and a number of other things that it's better to have and not need than need and not have.

Guinn's hands were a blur. He found what he was looking for: spider-expansion bolts and washers, and a screwdriver. He dove under the car, slipped the bolt through the washer and a gasket, and forced the bolt into the hole in the tank. He spun it with the screw-driver with a palm-on-palm technique he had learned in his wartime stretch in an aircraft factory, until the spider inside spread and the washer seated tightly over the hole. Then he wrenched off the tank cap and slopped in the fuel which had been caught in the bucket.

The whole operation had taken somewhat over ninety seconds.

Guinn hurled the bucket, screwdriver and upholstered panel into the back of the station wagon. He lifted Garry swiftly and gently and spread him out on the seat behind the driver's. There were cargo straps. He whipped one around Garry's chest, one around his thighs, and cinched them down. He took one precious moment to touch the youth's head with big, sensitive fingers, feeling carefully between the two holes. He pursed his lips worriedly, slid under the wheel and kicked the motor over. A patient rear fender took yet another wound-stripe as he slithered the car around, caromed off a tree, and headed out. He leaned forward, his hands placed lightly at "ten and two" like a racing driver's. He let the wheel shimmy through his fingers, and he drove.

TWO SHOTS. Garry got one. The gas tank got the other. The man who had cut up Percival's face had Lynn. Hadley Guinn was out to get that man.

On the third hairpin turn he craned over the edge as his wheels kicked stones out into space. Down below him he saw a dustcloud. He let his foot give four more ounces to the accelerator.

On the fourth turn he actually saw the convertible taking the last straight-away into the Spur road. Guinn groaned. He had two more hairpins to negotiate.

Or had he? The road zig-zagged down the mountain face, but that didn't necessarily mean he had to...

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This far down the hill, the grade flattened out. From this stretch there was about a four-to-one slope to the road below. From that road the grade was a mere thirty degrees or so.

"So what the hell," he growled, and pulled on the wheel.

For an endless second he had strictly a bird's-eye view all across the windshield. Then the front end came swooping downward. There was a nasty crunch as the road shoulder ground into the muffler pipe under the car's center of gravity, and then he was off the road, headed down the slope.

There wasn't time to think. There was just time to fight. He locked the brakes when the machine would slide straight, let it roll when it wanted to turn. He diddled the brakes and outguessed the wheel. A small avalanche accompanied him, and a rising cloud of dust joined hands with the growing dusk to make seeing tough.

Then the front wheels hit the shallow ditch of the next level of the swichback road. There was a harrowing snap as the bumper bulldozed into the ditch and broke off, and then the car was slanting across the road and down again off the other side. The underside took another blow, though not as severe this time, as the car levered over the edge. And once more the nightmare of rolling too fast and not sliding straight enough.

There was no appreciable ditch at the bottom, and it was a blacktop road. Guinn hauled the wheel over and the rubber screamed as he gunned down the Spur road. Looking across country he could see the convertible streaking along the township highway that would take it across the river and into the city.

Guinn bore down to the floor, and the station-wagon laid its ears back and went. With it, it carried an unholy din of scraping metal which suddenly ceased as the muffler and exhaust stack tore loose and skittered into the ditch. The car bellowed with an open throat. Guinn nodded grimly. Made to order; he could crowd six or seven miles more per hour out of the old dog without that manifold back pressure.

HE TOOK THE turn into the township road altogether too fast, and had the rear end into and out of the ditch on the far side of the turn. And then he was on the straightaway, with the convertible a distant beetle ahead of him. He glanced back at the mountain, and grinned tightly as he saw the long scar of his tracks straight down its naked face. He'd gotten a half-mile jump on the Chrysler by short-circuiting those two hairpins.

He checked ahead for traffic and then twisted to look back at Garry. The youth lay limp and pale in his straps. The bleeding seemed to have stopped for the time being. Guinn prayed that his probing fingers had been right.

Glancing ahead again, he felt a leap of joy as he saw that he was gaining on the convertible. Traffic was light, happily, and there was nothing between him and the other car. He pulled out the choke lever a tiny fraction and did his best to put his foot through the floorboards. He took his right hand off the wheel, fingered his gun out of its holster and wedged it between his right buttock and the seat.

Suddenly he stiffened, peered. The convertible was just about to gain the bridge, which carried the road on its own level as steep banks fell to the water below. And at the other end of the bridge, coming toward them, was the great hulking mass of a lowboy

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trailer carrying a fifty-ton power shovel. The bridge was wide enough for two lanes of ordinary traffic, but getting the Chrysler past it was going to be a trick.

He saw a single flicker of the convertible's brake lights, and then its driver apparently decided to bull through. Guinn saw the lowboy tractor lumbering as far over to his side of the bridge as it could, and the trailer reluctantly following. The swelling sides of the shovel's cab bulged far over the center-line of the roadway.

The brake lights flared again. The convertible would clear the tractor and probably the side of the shovel, but the rear end of the trailer was still slightly angled across the road.

The convertible braked, and braked again, and each time a huge bite was taken out of the distance between Guinn and his quarry. He was less than two hundred feet behind when it happened.

THE CHRYSLER found its opening and hurtled through. It must have nipped the back corner of the lowboy the lightest of touches, and it was all but scraping the guard rail on the right. In that split second the right-hand door of the Chrysler opened. It was a rear-hinged door; the wind flipped it wide. Its edge struck the guard rail and broke it off—and a slim figure in purple rose in the air and arched over the rail.

"Lynn!"

In the same instant he had to wrench his wheel right, then left to get through the same gap, a blessed inch or two wider now as the trailer straightened out on its side of the roadway. It had all happened so fast that the lowboy crew probably saw none of it, except two cars driving too damn fast.

Now Guinn *really* had a priority to choose.

He could go after his man and run him to earth—with the idea that Lynn might be hurt—drowned or crushed—in that wild leap over the rail. Or he could swing right at the end of the bridge, where an underpass connected with the River Road, and try to save her—knowing that the Chrysler would be miles away.

He peered at the license plate and knew he wouldn't forget it. He realized, too, that with Lynn out of the Chrysler, half his reason for catching it was gone. Of course, catching Percival's murderer was reason enough, but—

He cursed, and as he swept off the end of the bridge, pulled right. The convertible arrowed ahead.

DOWN UNDER the first pier of the bridge, Guinn pulled up. He glanced worriedly at Garry. "You'll just have to wait, son," he murmured.

He slipped his gun back in its holster and ran down to the water's edge. His first searching look was upward, at the roadway above. There was no sign of a body on the rail or on the second pier, seventy-five feet or so out in the river. She'd fallen clear, then. And on the upstream side. And then he saw her—the merest glimpse of water-darkened copper-blond hair, the flash of an arm against the brown stone of the pier.

He kicked off his shoes, shoved his gun in one and his wallet in the other, ran down a flight of stone boat-landing steps and plunged into the river.

He swam strongly out to the pier, wondering how he could have been so stupid as to have left his jacket on, figuring what the hell, it was a tropical and not very unwieldy; no point wasting it now. He gained the pier al-

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most under the bridge, for the current ran fairly strongly here. He pulled himself up on its platform-like surface, which was only a foot or so above water level, and walked squishily to the upstream end.

She was there, clinging weakly to the stone, breathing in deep gasps. When she saw him she yelped. "Oh!" She took in some water, coughed violently. He knelt and grasped her wrist.

The coughing subsided. "Mr. Guinn..." She pushed her hair back. One side of her face and one shoulder were scarlet. "I didn't...see you come up. I was...just getting my wind back ...before I ...tried to make...the bank."

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure, except I...hit awful hard... I'm —Mr. Guinn, I'm mother naked!"

"That was a smart move."

"It wasn't a move! Strapless dress and no bra and...when I hit I just skinned right out of it! Shoes and all...Even my... Oh, this is awful!"

"I've got news for you," said Guinn, his eyes twinkling. "I've seen the like before."

"I'm terribly sorry about it," she said surprisingly. "But...I got away from him, didn't I?"

"That you did. Don't talk now. Get your wind back and I'll give you a tow in. We've got to get to a hospital, but quick."

"Hospital? I'm—"

"Not you. Garry."

"He's—he's dead!"

"Not him. The slug slipped in under his temple and skinned around his big thick skull and came out over his ear, near the back, Concussion, maybe, but I don't think there's a fracture."

"Oh, come on." She turned immediately shoreward with long competent strokes.

GUINN LET her get out into the stream and then dove after her, coming up a little ahead. He swam with a side-stroke, watching her. She suddenly coughed again.

"Thought it was too soon," he said. "Float."

"Oh, I'm all—"

"Float," he said. Submissively, she did. He got a hand under her chin and towed her, his long legs supplying a powerful scissor kick, his free hand gathering armloads of distance. Lynn lay back, completely relaxed, filling her lungs gratefully. Again the current carried them downstream a little way and they had to work their way up the stone embankment to the landing.

"Please go ahead," she said. "I'm not prissy, but—"

"Don't fret," he said kindly. He scrambled up the steps and went to where he had left his shoes. Lynn hesitated, then ran up the steps and started up toward the car, which was parked out of sight of the riverside roadway under the bridge. She was perhaps halfway there when there was a flash and a roar from the road. A heavy calibre slug nicked a small sapling at Lynn's elbow. She squeaked.

"This way," snapped Guinn. "Jump!"

She ran to him; he motioned her past so that the first bridge pier was between her and the source of the shots. Guinn dropped back to the stone steps, backed down them until he had cover.

It was growing dark as reluctantly as any early summer night will. Guinn's eyes passed the car parked on the other side of the River Road twice before he noticed it looming in the shadow of a dogwood tree.

It was the Chrysler.

He took careful aim and snapped two shots at it. There was a distinctly audible gasp, then a moan. Guinn

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sprinted toward it. A bullet struck the ground at his feet and another tugged at his sleeve. He fired and hit the dirt. Before he could so much as raise his head the starter whinnied, the motor caught, and the car moved off. It turned and sped up the ramp to the bridge level. Guinn fired once more, stood fuming for a moment, and then went back to the girl. She was flattened against the river side of the pier.

"It's okay now," he said. He turned and went to the station wagon. She followed. "Was that my ardent swain?" she asked in a shaken voice.

HE GOT IN the car and opened the other door for her. "It was." He took off his jacket, wrung it out over the ground, shook it, and handed it across to her. She put it over her shoulders and climbed in. "He must have had an attack of second thought. Wondered if you had killed yourself or not. Came back to see. You showed up nicely against the dark river. He couldn't see the station wagon, and didn't notice me in this brown suit. It must have been a big surprise to him to get lead thrown back at him. Who is he, anyway?"

"I don't know him, really. His name's Mordi. He came into the—"

"Morty?"

"Mordi. He came into the hash house a few times. Dark. Dresses well. Very quiet." She shuddered. "I'll look out for those quiet ones after this. Steel traps . . . dynamite sticks . . . they're nice and quiet, un-*til*."

He started the motor, backed, turned, and got onto the River Road. She said suddenly, "Mr. Guinn . . ."

"Mmm?"

She hesitated. Then, "Mind if I take this off again? You'll think I'm terrible, but it's so clammy. And it's warm this evening and somehow it doesn't seem to matter. Though I don't know how I'll ever get out of the car in town."

"Go ahead," said Guinn. "It's getting dark. The passing parade will think you're still in that strapless job. You're right—it matters as much or as little as you let it. When we get to the hospital I'll see if there isn't a nurse's uniform I can swipe for you."

She peeled off the jacket and draped it over the seat between them. She crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders for a moment, then sat demurely with her hands on her lap.

He said, "You took a hell of a chance with that high-dive."

"Not so much," she said. "I used to swim there a lot. The channel's real deep between the bank and that second pier, and I knew that. I noticed the way that car door opened when I was with him this afternoon. I knew it would slam wide open if I just opened it a little and I was waiting my chance. When he had to swing so near the rail to pass that trailer—that was it. I got my feet under me and dove right off the seat. I used to go off there all the time. It's forty-two feet," she added.

"At about forty-two miles an hour, just then," he said. "Lucky you didn't break your back."

"Well, I didn't."

HE GLANCED at her admiringly. "Do you have to work at that hashhouse?"

"It's a job."

"You've got a better one if you want it."

"With you? Do you mean it?"

"Yup."

"Oh, I'd love it. I'd just love it."

A conquest, thought Guinn.

She said, "I could maybe see him every day."

"See who?"

"Garry."

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Not my conquest, he thought, and allowed himself one of his rare grins. "He's a good kid."

"He's the bravest man I've ever known! Why, when that man came up out of the woods like that..."

"Tell me about it."

"I was a little afraid of him at first, Garry I mean," she said. "The way he was looking at me. Then he started to talk. I never heard anybody talk the way he does. Not as if I was a girl. Just as if I was...well, people. About the car and you and jet aircraft and banana cream pie and the National League. It was..." She paused. "Anyway, we heard the other car start. Garry put a hand on my arm and said not to worry. That was all, just 'Don't worry.' I wish I could tell you how—safe—it made me feel.

"The car came up, and sure enough it was him—Mordi, the man I'd been riding with before I met you. He looked out at us and then stopped his car. He leaned out for a long time and looked at me and at Garry and the station wagon, and then he got out and came up to us. I never saw such cold eyes on a human being in my life, and they shouldn't be, they're not the right color to be so cold.

"Garry got out and they stood looking at each other. Finally Mordi said, 'Nobody cuts in on me, cotton-head.'

"Garry said, 'Beat it, cottonmouth. Nothing around here belongs to you.'

"So the man said to me, 'He's so wrong, ain't he, sugar?'

"And I said, 'He's so right.'

"He came up close, then, and told me I was going back with him. I just shook my head. Then Garry said, 'That'll do for now, tailor-dummy. Goodbye again.' And he reached inside his jacket. When he did that, Mordi pulled out a gun and shot him in the head."

GUINN'S EYES seemed to get smaller. "Garry never carries a gun," he said. "I'll have to tell him some things about raising on a three-card straight."

"He's too honest to get away with a bluff," said Lynn.

"Oh," said Guinn. The smile appeared again.

Lynn said, "He reached in and got my wrist. I didn't know he was going to pull so hard, so suddenly. He hauled me out and I was flat on my face before I knew what was happening. Then he hit me." She put her hand behind her neck, stroked. "I guess I went out, and I didn't come to all at once either. Everything was sort of dreamy for the longest time."

"I know that punch," said Guinn.

"I was in his car," she continued. "He wasn't. I heard another shot. I remember thinking he must have gone back to finish Garry. Or maybe you."

"Shot a hole in my gas tank," said Guinn.

"Oh. Well, before I was completely out of it, we were charging down the hill. He drove very fast. He laughed at me. He's crazy...what'd he want to kill a man over me for?"

"I don't want to take a compliment away from a lady," said Guinn, "but it wasn't over you. He killed somebody up there, and we were the only ones who'd seen him around. He knew what he was doing. That's why he came back just now to make sure you were out of the running. He seems to've missed me altogether. I guess while I was catfooting over toward the rocks on one side, he was sneaking back on the other."

She shuddered. "He laughed at me," she said. "He—he touched me, too."

"I'll speak to him about that sometime soon," said Guinn.

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THE COUNTY hospital was just outside the city limits, across the highway from forest land. It was quite dark when they reached it. Guinn pulled up across the road from the big brick pylons which flanked the entrance to the hospital drive.

"Out," he said.

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "What?"

He chuckled. "Cheer up. I'm not pulling a Mordi on you. Has it occurred to you that I've got to drive up to the emergency ward, floodlights and all, and that a couple of interns will be out to tote Garry in? Of course, I could explain that I'm helping you home from a floating crap game where you lost your shirt..."

She opened the door. "Hurry back," she said.

He watched her cross the road shoulder and enter the woods. He shrugged into his damp jacket. It was clammy, but would cover his holster. Then he pulled into the drive. He turned at the parking court, wondering about the mental processes of landscapers who built graceful curves into a road which so often would have life or death at the end of it, and swung in under the brightly-lit port-cochere.

A grizzled guard hobbled over to him, peered. "Had Guinn! Back again?"

"With a customer. Get a couple of butchers out here with a stretcher, will you, Jerry?"

He followed the old man in and went over to the registration window. "Hello, Cheryl."

A blonde woman with a face like the most comfortable of sofa pillows looked up through the glass. When she saw him she smiled. It was like the kind of lamplight that goes with that kind of pillow. "Hadley!"

"I brought Garry in," he said bluntly. "Someone creased his head."

She rose. "Is he—"

"Doesn't look too bad. But I'd like to know right away. I'm on a case. Will you take care of the gunshot report for me?"

"Oh, yes." She got out the form, slid it through to him.

He signed it on the bottom line. "One more thing. I know you people do the best you can, but I'd like you to think up something even better for Garry. Whatever he needs, hear? I mean anything."

He got his wallet out and thumbed through its inside compartment. An expression of almost stupid astonishment slackened his features.

Cheryl said, "What is it, Hadley? You been robbed?"

"No..." His eyes came back to earth. "No, Cheryl, I should say not." He pulled bills out of the wallet.

C-notes. Five of them.

HE CLOSED his eyes. There was that center drawer of his desk. In it, the telephone company's envelope. In the envelope, three of the C-notes the Morgan chick had given him. Five minus three left two. There ought to be two hundred in the wallet. There were five.

"What is it, Hadley?"

He looked at her. "Just trying to figure out whether or not I'd tipped a waiter. Here." He slid two of the bills through the hole. They settled to her desk like a couple of pigeons on a roof. That's extra, over the bill. I got more."

"You don't have to—"

"I do have to. I just want to know he's a bit more than all right. Uh... you don't have to talk to him about it."

She smiled. "The way you treat him, he thinks you hate him." She picked up the money.

"So he keeps on trying hard to

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make me happy. If he thought I was happy, why should he bother?"

"You're a softy, Hadley Guinn."

"You're a pretty hard character yourself." He winked at her. "Oh. Cheryl—"

"Yes, Had."

"Can you dredge me up a nurse's uniform? Not the starched job—one of those lab wraparounds."

"What on earth for?"

"My Sunday school's putting on a pageant," he explained. "I'm to be Florence Nightingale."

"Idiot. What size?"

"About Miss Roark and a half." Miss Roark was the trim one in the super's office.

"Sure, Hadley." She went through a door at the back of the office. Guinn turned. They were bringing Garry in. He looked very white. Guinn followed the internes into the receiving ward. A tired man with wakeful eyes waved the internes toward an examining table. "Hello, Jim."

The doctor thumped his shoulder. "Good to see you. That's your Number One boy, isn't it? Garry what's-his-name?"

"Yeah. Can you give me a verdict quickly? I got to go."

"What happened to him?"

THE DOCTOR bent over Garry's head while Guinn told him. Then he rolled Garry's lids back, peered at the eyes. He put on his stethoscope and prodded around with it.

"He might need a transfusion. Concussion possibly. Shock certainly. He might have trouble with the hearing on that side for a while. He's a lucky boy."

"How long will the transfusion take me?"

"No time at all. Not for you, Guinn. He's Type B, you're A. Don't worry about it. We have lots in the bank. You won't do."

"You can tell by my astral vibrations?"

The doctor laughed. "I can tell by memory. The last time you two gave blood for the Red Cross he asked me what your bloodtype was, and swore a blue streak when he found out his was different. He thought he might be useful to you some time."

"Hell." Guinn looked at the still face. "Take care of him, Jim."

"Sure." He bent over the patient again. Guinn read that one casual syllable all the way through, and in it found out what sort of care Garry was going to get. He said, "Thanks, Jim," and went out.

Cheryl was waiting for him with a neatly folded paper package. "Hadley..."

"Oh, thanks, Cheryl. The uniform." He took it.

She said, "I think I ought to tell you. There was someone here today boning through the hospital records. Yours especially."

"Looking for what? That bone operation?"

She shook her head. "That's in the journals—how they picked a .44 slug piece by piece out of your bone marrow. No, Hadley, the birth records."

His face went absolutely expressionless. "Who was it?"

"A girl. A really beautiful girl."

"Probably from a matrimonial agency trying to answer some maiden's prayer. What kind of authority did she have?" Cheryl recoiled at the way the last words grated out. Guinn touched her shoulder. "Sorry. Well?"

"She had identification from State Census. Strictly kosher. I just thought you ought to know." Her eyes were very soft. "Hadley, it makes more difference than it should to you. Not the investigator. You know."

"My birth records. Yes, I know.

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Maybe it does. It makes a difference to any of us." He looked down at the package, crinkled the paper. "Hey, I got to get out of here. Thanks for everything, Cheryl."

"For nothing, honey. Hadley, I won't ask you about your business, but if you've got to go near any more gun fights, let's not have any more hospital cases on your side. Hm?"

He went to the door, waved. "I'll be good." She cared. She gave a damn. It's fine to know somebody gives a damn. "By the way, what was the name of the nosy chick?"

Cheryl said, "Morgan."

HADLEY STEERED through the pylon-guarded entrance, wheeled across the highway, and stopped. He waited.

Nothing happened.

He slid across the seat and peered into the black wall of the forest. Nothing.

He got back behind the wheel. He lit a cigarette. That took a little time. He opened the package, wadded up the paper and tossed it back over the seat, unfolded the crisp white dress and draped it over the seat next to him. That took some time too.

She didn't come.

He uttered a sudden snort of disgust. Of course! The lights. He shifted, angled the car close in to the ditch, and shut off the lights and motor.

It was very quiet out there. The forest slept, but for all its sleep, it was alive with little creaks and whisperings. He climbed out, and something made him close the door very quietly.

There was no wind. Somewhere a train uttered a two-toned cry, and the mountains threw it back like a wailing wall. The hospital was a gold-checkered garment tossed carelessly on a hassock, with the checks showing randomly back, up, across. The emergency entrance blazed defiantly at the patient blackness, and from the whole structure came a hum of power; machines turning, water running, life flowing, coming in, going out.

The woods had their low, live sound, too, but it was at odds with the hospital and everything it represented. The forest had its light, too.

It took Guinn a while to see the light, because his pupils were still tensed from the brilliance of the receiving ward. It was not firelight, and it wasn't a flashlight. It looked like the third or fourth reflection of a welder's arc, but without an arc's flicker. Nor was it steady, like a magnesium flare; it waxed and waned irregularly, like the sound of a crowd at a prize fight. And it was very, very dim.

Guinn hesitated. Had Lynn seen the light? Probably. She had been very alone and very watchful, crouching naked in the dark. Had she then gone to investigate? It could be. She had more guts than most regiments. If he went in there, he might miss her. If she got to the car and he wasn't there, would she wait for him?

What else?

HE REACHED in the window, got his keys out of the ignition and the dress from the front seat. His clothes were still damp, but the night was very warm. He folded the dress and tucked it inside his jacket, on the right side. Then he headed for the brush.

The thicket just over the ditch was like an ancient boxwood, tangled and impenetrable. He cast to the right until he found what looked like an opening. He had to fight the branches, and he did so quietly. He got through, and found himself in a patch of wood that

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was very like virgin forest— a solid roof overhead and very little underbrush. He could see the light much better now, waxing and waning through the stark trunks. The going was good, and the possibility of Lynn's being back here made a lot more sense. The first thing she would have done would be to get through the hedge; after that, the light must have beckoned her strongly.

He forged ahead, unconsciously taking on the sliding stride of a natural woodsman, finding and avoiding projecting roots and rocks. His eyes were wide; he felt that an infrared picture would show his pupils almost as big as his irises. Bigger, maybe. His lips twitched at the fantastic thought, and he switched it out of his mind.

He began to hear the voice.

There is a passage in Ravel's *Bolero* where the composer, either through a thorough scientific knowledge of vibratory physics or instinctively, under the guidance of his trained ears, gives the great droning solo theme to the clarinet, and adds a piccolo part. That piccolo, on paper, is sheer nonsense. It plays the same theme at the same intervals, but in a different and totally unrelated key. It makes almost as little sense on the piano. Orchestrated, it creates one of the most astonishing effects known to music. Its compulsion, as it restates the already hypnotic theme, is indescribable—and largely a function of the psychological susceptibilities of the listener. In acoustical terms, what is happening is that the clarinet, more than most instruments, projects harmonics with its basic tone. Ravel's amazing treatment uses a piccolo, which is very stingy with its overtones, to reinforce the usually inaudible fifth harmonic of the clarinet. The effect is that of a new voice, never heard before, speaking with the familiar tones of a friend.

THIS LITTLE known piece of musicology flashed through Guinn's mind as he heard the voice. The analogy was an exact one, for that was precisely what was happening, except that the voice which stated the basic tone was something more than human. It was certainly a single voice, but it had the quality of a great many ranges, from the highest tenor to the most shattering *basso profundo*, all speaking in unison. The second voice, the one pitched in a disharmony that served to reinforce a single one of the qualities of the main voice—that second one was familiar. In the rare moments that his acute ear could tune it away from its accompanying diapason, Guinn knew that he had heard those full, high, sweet tones before.

Something began to bother him. He had moved forward a hundred feet before he realized what it was. His legs; the voice; the light—they were meshing too closely in their movements. Furiously, he identified it; he was walking in time to a beat which was created by the sound and the changing light. Not that they changed with any predictable regularity. Far from it. But as if they were part of some incredibly complex, rigidly fixed ritual, they touched and fled from and syncopated a basic beat—a beat faster than a quiet heart, forcefully held slower than a frightened and guarded one. He broke stride, fiercely defending his independence.

The light seemed to have its source in a circular area of the forest floor, and the voice was born somewhere in the light. The ground rose gently as he walked; suddenly, then, he saw it all.

There was a dip in the forest,

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a saucer-like depression thirty yards or so across. As he reached its lip, the entire scene below was revealed to him, suddenly, completely, as if a great curtain had parted.

A tremendous oak stood in the center of the depression. Its mighty spread had waned off anything but moss that had tried to grow around it, so that there was a smooth clearing around it. Standing at its base was the biggest man Guinn had ever seen.

He was standing in the clearing, his face upturned, his arms out toward the oak. He looked like an old oak himself. His skin was dark brown, his face gnarled, his arms knotted and powerful. They stretched out like winter limbs from the dazzlingly white sleeveless robe which covered him from his shoulders to his bare feet. The light-source was his robe, and his lips were the source of the great voice.

Behind him knelt Lynn, sitting on her heels, with her back arched and her hands on the ground behind her. Her head was up, her tangled, fine hair thrown back. Her teeth shone and her eyes blazed. Her lips moved. The second, harmonic voice was hers, in its highest register. It was modulated exactly to his magnificent chanting; she spoke so perfectly in concert with him that they might both have been controlled by the same mind, like two pipes of an organ under the knowing hand of a master.

THE CHANT at first seemed wordless. Guinn slowly realized it was not. It was a series of syllables, most of them long drawn vowel sounds without diphthongs, like those in an Irish brogue. They were separated by unearthly consonants, staccato and clean. The language was like nothing he had ever heard, but it was good to listen to.

He stood there for uncounted moments, forgetting to breathe, completely entranced. There was an intensity to the light which changed with the quality of the sounds, and there was a quality to the light which changed with the sounds' pitch. It was a thing which had to be experienced to be understood, and once that understanding occurred, it was inexpressible.

The huge dark man dropped one of his massive hands to the wide white belt that was clasped around his waist. From it he drew a long, slightly curved dagger that gleamed like gold. He held it point upward in both hands. Guinn followed his gaze, and saw that it was pointed at a cluster of dark green leaves and white berries on the tree-trunk. The dagger began to move upward toward it.

This, later, was the most inexplicable thing of all to Guinn. For at no time did the man change his position. He did not lose his grasp on the knife; he kept both hands on its hilt. The tree did not move. Yet—

The knife went out and up, slowly and steadily. It reached the trunk of the oak, turned and sliced off the clump of glossy green. The man, standing twenty feet away from the tree, had bridged the gap between him and a growth twelve feet from the ground. His arms had not stretched; in no way did he seem out of proportion. In fact, the movement seemed utterly right. Guinn felt that he had seen a movement in a new direction, and that he could not be surprised. He seemed to have known of that direction for a long time but never had bothered to look that way before.

The plant fell. One of the great brown hands was there before it, caught it, laid it on the moss before the knotted feet.

Then the man turned, stood facing outward, away from the tree. Lynn's body turned as he turned, and now she

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knelt with her back toward him, her arms down, her long slim hands palm-upward on the ground.

Guinn's eyes flicked to the hand holding the knife, to the smooth white back bowed before him. He reached into his left armpit and eased the .32 out.

Shockingly, the chant stopped. The silence was deafening, unbearable. The light was unchanging, muted. There was a great expectancy in the wood.

He looked around the clearing. So compelling had been the tableau by the oak that he hadn't taken in the edges of the scene at all.

THE BUSHES around the depression looked as if they were filled with rhinestones—with emeralds, rubies—with...*eyes!*

And they were eyes. The low branches held silent birds, their little heads turned sidewise so that one eye could take in the scene. From a tree-fork at his shoulder hung the luxuriously dressed form of a raccoon, which stared fixedly at the big man. Guinn looked down. What he had thought was a small stump was a fox, not six feet away from him. Its black, wet nose tossed delicate spangles of light as it pressed its head down and forward toward the oak. On the ground in front of it—almost between its paws—was a chipmunk, staring brightly, and holding its deft small hands together in frozen ecstasy.

There was a deep crooning. Guinn looked back at the dark man. He had not moved, but the sound came from him. And Lynn's high, sweet supplement was there too; he could see the flexing of her rib-cage as she drew breath between the mesmeric phrases.

Something moved at the lip of the depression, forty-five degrees across from Guinn's viewpoint, and directly in front of Lynn.

One...no, two big brown rabbits came toward her. They did not hop. They moved belly-down, like stalking cats. It affected Guinn almost more than anything else had. The animals were in the throes of some strange supplication, and their completely uncharacteristic gait caused a deep pain in him somewhere.

They reached the girl, and lay down, one across each of her hands. She lifted them. They drooped, motionless except for their hind legs, which were taut, stiff, quivering in rapid spasm.

Still singing, Lynn rose to her feet and brought the rabbits to the big man. Guinn realized how big he was. Lynn was a tall girl, but her head barely reached the level of the man's heart. The rabbits were large ones—eight or nine-pound jacks; but both, lying side by side, barely covered the huge dark hand from thumb-base to fingertips.

Holding both rabbits in one hand, the man turned to face the tree again. Lynn was suddenly silent. The man shouted four crackling syllables, and with a single sweep of his golden dagger, sliced off the rabbits' heads.

THE MUSCLES of Guinn's jaw crackled audibly. He became conscious of a long-forgotten fact—that his automatic was in his right hand. He raised it, took the barrel in his left, held it while he released the cramped right fingers and flexed them until he felt they could be trusted. Then he grasped the molded grip again, got his index finger under the guard.

The big man was moving now, holding the twitching bodies downward. Dark blood was spouting, and with it he was sprinkling the roots of the tree. As Guinn brought his gun hand up, the man disappeared around the tree.

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The huge shadow of the tree moved opposite the light-source, sweeping across the clearing like a monstrous hand brushing away flies. And at its touch the animals scattered like flies, an approaching, passing, receding wave of squeaks and squawks, whimpers, growls, hoots and rustlings. Behind the passing shadow the tree-limbs moved and their leaves fluttered, and the underbrush whipped and thrashed. Before it, the forest was spangled with the gleaming of their fixed eyes.

Then the big man rounded the trunk, still holding the carcasses. Their blood dripped now instead of spurting, and he held them close to the roots and moved slowly.

When his circuit was completed he stopped, dropped the rabbits, and turned toward Lynn, who stood watching him tensely, her lips parted, her head up. And Guinn brought up his gun and fired. He aimed over the man's left shoulder, purposely high.

The man's hand came up in unison with Guinn's. Just behind the crash of Guinn's gun came a distinct *thunk!*

And Guinn found himself gaping down at that laughing dark face—laughing so that the leaves shivered—and following the movement of the small object being tossed in the huge hand.

The giant had caught Guinn's bullet not only in his hand, but between his thumb and forefinger.

You're acting like a rube, he snarled at himself. The hand is quicker than the eye—even the private eye. He tightened his grip on himself, on his gun. "Sorry to interrupt," he said into the echoing silence that followed the giant's laughter, "but the lady was with me."

"You interrupted nothing," said the giant pleasantly. "We were quite finished."

"Who are you?" Guinn rapped.

The man looked at him thoughtfully. "You know who I am."

"I do?"

"You do. When you admit that you do, you'll seek me out. Until then. . . ." He made a courtly gesture, a sort of casual salute. Then the light—went out.

Guinn bit his tongue and cursed. The darkness had hit his eyeballs like a physical blow, and he literally sagged under the impact. He stood in the blackness, shaking, sweating, waiting.

GRADUALLY THERE was a leaf-torn sky again, the dim presence of tree trunks. Somewhere a mouse squeaked. Overhead he heard the tiny, unlubricated sound of a bat. A breath of wind passed, and the forest seemed to exhale quietly.

"Lynn. . ."

"Yes, I'm here."

"Is he—"

"He's gone." He heard her feet as she left the mossy carpet and crossed dead leaves. She was climbing toward him. He put out his hand. It touched her body; soft, warm, unafraid. His throat was dry and burning and his flesh was cold and clammy. He found her hand and said again, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes."

"Where is he?" he whispered. "He must be standing down there."

"He isn't," she said positively. "He's gone."

He peered down into the blackness, and abruptly there was a sort of flow, a warm radiation of comfort and relaxation. There was proportion and reality in the world again. "Yes," he said, surprising himself. "He's gone."

Hand in hand they followed the glow, the mechanical hum of the hospital, which was now visible. "Lynn, what happened?"

"I saw the light," she said quietly.

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"I went to see. I think I was afraid at first. I thought if I knew what the light was I wouldn't be afraid any more, so I went to look. He was..."

She fell behind as they passed between close-set trees, then caught up and took his hand again. "He was—waiting for me. It was as if I knew him, knew what to do... You saw, didn't you?"

"Yes. Lynn, what was it for? Who is he?"

She was silent as they worked their way through the blackness. She was quiet for so long that he squeezed her hand and said, "Well?"

She said, "If you're around somebody a whole lot—your brother or someone you go to school with or something—do you suddenly stop and say 'What's your name?' It was sort of like that. No, I never saw him before. I never did those things before. But it didn't occur to me to ask any questions."

He said, because he wanted to know, "He didn't touch you?"

"Oh, no!"

"I believe," said Guinn, "that two things and two things get you four things. I believe that every effect has a cause, and every reaction is there because of some action." He paused, and then said almost plaintively, "I've got to believe that, Lynn!"

She chuckled. She was certainly not laughing at him. She reached her other hand over and patted his wrist. "Hard guy," she said.

THEY REACHED the hedge. Guinn fumbled along it for an opening. He stopped suddenly. "I plumb forgot." He reached inside his jacket and got the nurse's uniform, shook it out. "This won't look like Fifth Avenue," he said apologetically.

"What is— Oh! A dress! Thank you..." She shrugged into it, and as she buttoned the belt, she said, "I didn't feel naked until you handed me that."

In an obscure way, he felt like apologizing. He didn't. He said, "I didn't feel you were." He turned to the hedge, added, "You suppose I'm getting old?"

"Do you suppose I'm getting brazen?"

It was the right answer. Something was going on here—some shift in perspective, some new element in the atmosphere. "Come on."

They broke through and emerged into the highway some hundred yards below the parked station wagon. They walked silently, each deeply immersed in thought. Lynn spoke once: "Is Garry—"

"He's going to be all right."

"I knew that," she said wonderingly. "I seem to've known that all along. Remember when I got into the car, when he was lying on the seat? I didn't do anything for him. I barely even looked at him. I didn't have to; I *knew* he was all right."

Then they reached the car, got in. Guinn found his keys, started the car. They pulled into the highway and moved off toward the town. It wasn't easy to talk against the roar of the unmuffled exhaust, and they didn't try too hard. Lynn gave him her address, and when they reached the town he found it without trouble. He pulled up in front of it. It was a frame house with a vine-covered porch and a picket fence. There was a sign on a post in the lawn that said ROOMS TRANSIENT PERMANENT.

Lynn got out. Guinn leaned across the seat and looked up at her. "I owe you an outfit."

"You do not. I owe you a whole lot more."

"A clout on the neck?"

"I got hit much harder than that," she twinkled. "Shall I come to your

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office tomorrow?"

"Call me," he said. Her face seemed to fall a trifle. He said, "I meant what I said about that, Lynn. Square yourself with your boss at the cafe."

"Thanks. Oh, thanks so much."

"I'm ahead." He waved his hand and started the car. He had to turn it around, and as he sped past her place again she was still on the porch, tiptoe on her bare feet, waving.

GUINN PARKED the car in front of his building and sagged for a moment. He felt as if he had earned the luxury of letting his back bend for a few seconds. He thought.

He thought about Lynn, and about the extraordinary scene in the wood, about the man in the convertible who shot at girls and flayed off the skin on people's faces, strip by strip. He thought back and back through his day's work until he got to lunch time, where it started. The Morgan girl and her vagueness and her fantastic expense money. He took out his wallet.

In it were five one hundred-dollar bills.

He sat very quietly, with his eyes closed.

She'd given him five centuries. He'd put three in the drawer before he left. At the hospital he'd found he had five left, not two. He'd given two hundred to Cheryl. Now he had five left instead of three.

He thought, there are two kinds of things going on around here. One is the kind of thing I understand, and the other is the kind of thing I don't understand.

Is that simple enough? he asked himself.

It should be.

I understand about guys who make rough passes at girls. I understand about guys who torture people to get information from them. I even understand about girls who have guts enough to dive out of a moving car over the railing of a forty-foot cliff.

But I don't understand about men who can coax rabbits out to have their throats cut, and can pluck a .32 slug out of the air. I don't understand a guy who makes a chanting and somehow controls a girl's voice to synchronize with it like that. And I especially don't understand about this money.

Guinn sat up a little straighter. He knew he would be better off if he forgot the things he couldn't understand. He also knew that he couldn't. What he could do was seal them up in the back of his mind. Maybe he'd find the bridge between the known and the unknown; maybe some silly little piece of evidence would show up that would be the missing link. Until then, he wasn't going to beat his brains out.

He swung the door open, pulled out the ignition key, dropped it in his pocket and climbed out. He stretched. He felt tired. He kicked the car door closed and went into the building.

Old George, the night elevator man, was asleep on a battered rung chair, his Adam's apple still pretending it was a chin, and chewing. Guinn walked up the two flights. He was glad to be back. He thumbed out his door key and let himself into the dark waiting room, crossed to the inner office, turned on the light.

"HELLO," SOMEBODY said gravely.

He stood dangling his key stupidly. He was stiff with shock. Shock was a vise on his abdomen, a clamp on his heart, a quick-freeze on his lungs. He didn't show it.

"Please shut it. There's a draft," said the girl called Morgan.

Guinn tossed the key, caught it, put it away. He crossed the office and

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got behind the desk and sat down. He glowered at her. She sat where she had been before. Her legs were crossed and her hair gleamed and she still had the most exquisite mouth he had ever seen. Her skin was still young and her eyes ancient. Instead of the caped dress, she now wore a lime-colored number with a demure little white collar buttoned under her chin. There was another button an inch above her waistline. Between the two buttons the material separated, no wider than a finger, all the way down. This was a garment with something to say, and it made its points.

"I'd like a progress report," she said.

He snorted and reached for the phone, dialled. While he waited for the connection, he glared at her. If she had grinned at him he would have thrown the phone at her. She didn't grin. She watched him levelly, and waited.

"Sam," Guinn said into the phone. "Yeah, I know it's late. Look, I want you to climb into your jalopy and take a trip. No—not tomorrow; now! Don't say that, chum. You know I wouldn't call you if it wasn't important. Okay, then...That's better.

"I want you to get up to Percival's cave. Yeah. No, he won't. Somebody knocked him off today. Damn you, would I kid about a thing like that? All right then. Sorry, I knew him a long time. Anyway, the wagon's come and gone by now, but his goats are still up there. I want you to round 'em up and take care of them. Yeah. And don't forget to milk the nannies. They've missed one milking already, maybe two, and that's no good. It hurts 'em.

"Right. All right, Sam. You're okay, you short-tempered old scut. Stay with 'em; I'll be up in the morning. Sam—thanks."

He put the phone down, took out his wallet, got out the five bills, dropped them on the desk, and pushed them across the desk with a pencil eraser. "Here."

She lowered her lids to look at the money. Her lashes almost touched her cheeks. When she was asleep they probably did. "What's that for?"

"It's your money. I don't want it. I don't want your case, either."

SHE NODDED, almost placidly. She picked up the money, opened the chartreuse and black handbag she carried, and dropped the money into it. "That's not all the money you've gotten from me, is it?"

"I gave you five."

Her gaze dropped to the desk. He cursed suddenly, viciously, ripped the drawer open and got the telephone bill. The old envelope tore in two as he pulled the banknotes out of it.

Three bank notes. C-notes.

He looked up at her, his face frozen. "The hand," he said, "is quicker than the —" He stopped, because he remembered saying, or thinking, the same thing just recently. This afternoon, or was it—

She took the money and put it away in her purse. She asked, without smiling, without frowning either: "Why don't you want the case?"

He said, "I wouldn't be so foolish as to accuse you of sending me up on the Hill when you did just so old Percival would get what he got. But it figures the same way. I'll never live so long that I'll forget this afternoon —or the fact that you had something to do with it."

"How do you figure that?"

He reached behind him and switched on a hot plate. He swizzled the pot that stood on it to see how much water was in it. Satisfied, he turned back to her. "You've been asking questions about this stone, this

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cup, or whatever it is. Some hood figured it was valuable, went after it. Percival got— Miss Morgan, do you know what was done to him?"

"I can imagine."

He snorted. "The hell you can."

She considered him in her expressionless way. "I take it you're going to drop the whole thing, then."

"I didn't say that. I said I didn't want your case. How far I chase down my own affairs is up to me."

HER EXPRESSION changed, but there was no saying exactly how. It wasn't in the eyes, the mouth. It was, if anything, something inside. But now she looked pleased.

He was annoyed. "I gave you the money," he said pointedly. When she simply sat, watching him, he said, "And tomorrow I change that lock."

"Locks mean nothing to me," she said.

"They do to me, if they're mine. Miss Morgan, I think I'm taking up too much of your time."

"Oh, no." She shook her head solemnly.

He rummaged into his desk, found a jar of instant coffee and some restaurant-style containers. He spooned the powder into a container, switched off the hot-plate, and poured steaming water into the coffee. He sat stirring it, looking at her. He didn't offer her any.

From his top right-hand drawer he got a handful of pretzel sticks. Dunking one, he stuck the end into his mouth.

"This is where you came in," he said.

She nodded.

"Damn it!" he exploded. "What are you after?"

She said, "Wouldn't it be better with rye?"

He had the container to his lips as she spoke. His nostrils distended. There's a distinctive odor to strong black coffee with a dollop of rye in it—and this had it.

Guinn's first reaction was to drop it; his second to throw it. His third was to drink it. He did none of these things. He put it down with a consciously controlled rock-steadiness. He selected a pretzel-stick carefully and dunked it. It tasted of rye. He finished it slowly, wiped his hand across his mouth, and took out a cigarette. As he clawed a book of matches up from the desk, the girl raised one hand from her lap and pointed a finger at him. Something like a swift butterfly of flame whisked across from the finger to his cigarette, and was gone. He drew back violently, followed by a faint curl of tobacco smoke. He automatically dragged on the cigarette. It was lit, and the unexpected gout of smoke made him cough. He thought he smelled ozone.

"Do something else casual," said the girl, as quietly and offensively as ever. "I can keep this sort of thing up all night."

"Okay," he said harshly. "What's your story, Miss Morgan?"

"Look in your wallet."

"I know what's in the wallet."

"You do?"

A DANGEROUS light came into his eyes. Silently he took out his wallet, opened it, drew out five one-hundred dollar bills and put them and the wallet down side by side on the desk.

"Very good." He wet his lips. "I guess this means that the two yards I left at the hospital for Garry are phoney—if they're there at all. I'm beginning to like you, Miss Morgan."

"No," she said quickly. "They're real. They're all real."

"They come from some place."

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"They come from people who won't miss it—or who shouldn't have it."

"How?"

"You wouldn't understand." There was no effrontery in her voice; she was stating a flat fact.

"I'm a pretty understanding guy," he said.

She rose and came close to the desk. She smelled of vanilla, and, faintly, of mignonette. She glanced back at the chair and gestured slightly. It slid across to her. It must have been lifted a fraction of an inch off the floor, because it made no sound. She sat in it and said, "Do you think you're going crazy?"

"No," he said positively. "If that's what you're after, you've done everything wrong."

"How so?"

He stretched out his legs. "I don't know that you've earned a lecture on the secrets of my success. But I don't mind telling you that I can be puzzled but not mystified. If I throw that switch, the hot-plate lights up. I understand that. If Einstein tells me that light can only go just so fast, I don't understand it, but I accept it. If another five yards shows up in that wallet I won't understand it—" His fist came down with a crash—"and damn if I accept it. Now, quit your skylarking around, or—"

"Or?"

He shrugged, suddenly, and smiled. "Or make sense."

The smile, apparently, worked. She smiled too, and it was the first time. He'd seen a lot of wonderful things today, but nothing like this.

"Pour us a drink, and I'll talk sense."

"I haven't got any liq—" he began, and then caught the bare suggestion of an amused crinkle at the corners of her age-old eyes. He opened the top drawer, then remembered what he had done with the bottle. He scooped it up out of the waste paper basket and held it up. It had about two fingers in it. He raised his eyebrows resignedly and found a couple of shot-glasses under "G" in the filing cabinet. He poured. There was just enough to fill both glasses, and when he put the bottle down there was about two fingers of liquor surging around the bottom.

THEY LIFTED their glasses. It didn't look like any rye he had ever seen. It had gold flecks which were in constant, dazzling motion, and it seemed to have an elusive blue cast to its gleaming amber. Her glass touched his, and one of her fingers, and he experienced a distinct and pleasant shock.

He drank.

For a split-second he thought he had swallowed nothing at all, so smoothly did it go down. Then his earlobes warmed up like radiant heaters, and there came a feeling in his throat as if it had grown an internal pelt of finest mink.

"This you get for nothing?"

She shook her head. "From nothing. But it isn't easy."

"It's worth the trouble." He poured again. "Talk."

She lowered her eyes for a moment, then said, "I've been looking for you for a long time."

"I thought it was a stone you were looking for."

"Oh, it is. But you're the only man who can find it."

"There're a lot of private eyes."

"There's only one like you."

He turned on her suddenly. "You were smelling around the hospital records."

She nodded. "I had to find something out."

"Did you?"

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"Yes."

"Now you know why I'm so lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"You know the old stories about the seventh son of a seventh son," he said harshly. "Well, like a guy called Geosmith once said, I'm the seventh bastard of a seventh bastard."

"Why do you make jokes that hurt you?" she asked gently.

"I like to be the first one to make 'em. You get your nose rubbed in a thing like that."

"And things like your real name?"

"You did snoop."

"I had to know."

"Why? To find that stone?"

"Yes," she said. "You have it."

"Not unless you planted it on me, like this cabbage." He flicked the banknotes with his fingernail.

"You can be ever so sure I didn't," she said seriously. "I want it too badly. I just want to..." Her fingers curled. She had long slender, strong fingers. "...to hold that cup. Just to hold it in these two hands."

HE LOOKED at her tense face wondering where all the cold poise had gone. "Well, it ought to be a snap. I have it, you want it. Tell me where I've hidden it and I'll hand it over."

"I can't tell you where it is. You've got to find it yourself."

"I thought you were going to talk sense."

She sighed. "Has it dawned on you yet that this is a slightly unusual case?"

He glanced again at the money. "Seems so."

"Then you have to take what comes as sense. Guinn, is a radio set magic?"

"Not to me it isn't."

"But it would be to a bushman."

"Mmm. So now I'm a bushman. I see what you mean. You're using my own arguments on me. If there's anything I don't understand in all this, it's because I don't have the background for it. Don't worry, I'm not going to get superstitious."

"All right. But a lot of this is going to demand new thinking—a new kind of thinking from you."

"Do it to me."

"All right. You went up on the Hill today. You picked up a girl called Lynn. She'd had some trouble with a man named Mordi. When you got to Percival, you found him in terrible shape. He talked to you and then died. When you got back to your friend Garry, you found him wounded by this same Mordi. You then—"

"Now, wait. Were you there?"

"No."

"Then—"

"It was just something you had to go through."

"What are you talking about?"

"Shall I start again from the beginning? You are a very special person, Hadley Guinn. You, and only you can find that cup. And the stone on it. Unless and until you find out who you are, you won't know where that cup is or how to find it. You can't be told—it's absolutely essential that you figure it out for yourself. In order to be able to figure it out, you've got to go through certain things. You'll keep on going through these things until you do figure it out—or die in the attempt. You already have all the evidence you need, but you won't look in the right direction. You've got a psychological block as big as a house that keeps you from it. You'll have to find it, or die. And if you're going to find it, it damn well better be soon!"

"Suppose I don't?"

"We...you...won't have to worry any more."

"I'm not worried now."

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"Yes you are."

He studied his hands. "Yeah," he grunted. "You're right about that." He thought for a moment. "Those things I have to...go through. You mean like finding old Percival that way?"

SHE NODDED. "And everything else that's happened since I walked in here."

"Sort of...staged?"

"You can call it that."

He pushed back his chair and stood up, looming over her like a cliff. "Did you have something to do with it?"

"Something."

"With what happened to Percival? To Garry?" His voice was rich with self control.

She looked up at him with perfect composure. "Percival volunteered."

"Volun—for that!"

"He knew who you were. He's known for years. He's watched over you and guided you more than you'll ever know. He knew what you were before I did—and I've known it for a long time. As for Garry, what happened to him had to happen, because you had to feel just that way about something. You're in a bigger play than you think you are. Now, sit down and stop blowing up like a sea squab, or I'll stick a pin in you and bust you."

Slowly, he sat down. "You better talk some more."

"I will. Lynn was in it for the same reason. Don't you see? Percival was the symbol of a lot of large issues to you. I don't have to draw you a diagram about them. They all came to a focus in him, and with his death they came front and center."

"Did he have to die that way?" growled Guinn.

"He did." She held up a commanding hand. "I told you—I'm 'talking sense', just as you asked me to. Damn you, you'll hold still for it. Garry is something you protect and teach, and he matters very much to you on those terms. You saved his life by your quick thinking, taking the car down the mountain face that way, getting him to the hospital in time—"

"You'll remember I stopped on the way."

"That was on the agenda. You had a choice to make, and you gave it to Lynn. You let her danger be more important to you than either Mordi or Garry's life."

"I suppose that strip act was part of it."

"Of course it was! You had to see how she reacted to you under circumstances that would have had her hysterical with anyone else. She trusted you because she could trust you—because you are you."

"Go on." His eyes were closed, his vision turned inwards.

"Cheryl," said the girl. "Someone who cared. Doctor Jim. Someone you trusted. And the ritual of the oak. Something you had to see."

"Why that?"

"Because, with a mind that refuses to see anything that isn't straight cause and effect, you had to witness effects with causes you'll never understand—and trust your own eyes! The same goes for the money and this liquor. Pour me some more, by the way."

THERE WASN'T much in the bottle—only a couple of fingers. Resignedly, he poured, and filled his own glass.

"Miss Morgan," he said carefully, "you are very beautiful and you have a great bag of tricks. But your story is as full of holes as a yard of cheesecloth. I don't know what you're after, but from where I sit you're a rich bitch with a warped sense of humor

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and an army of spies. Shut up!" he barked as her extraordinary eyes flamed with indignation.

"I still think Percival died because you've been wandering around yammering about some secret treasure he's suppose to've been on to. That's the kind of story that gets believed about eccentrics like him who've never given a hoot about money. I think you're responsible for his murder because of it. I don't know but what you hired Lynn to help you pull the wool over my eyes, to slip extra money into my wallet, to pull that fancy performance in the woods. I haven't figured out yet how half this sleight-of-hand was pulled, but I will. I'll sweat some of it out of Lynn and dope the rest out for myself."

"Why, you—"

"If that fairy story of yours was true, that this whole thing was scripted out to put me through some paces, it'd mean outside circumstances that widen to where you couldn't have had a damn thing to do with them. What about the timing of that lowboy trailer—was that arranged?"

"Yes!"

He snorted. "The effect that old Percival had on me when I was a kid?"

"Yes!"

Sarcastically, he said, "The old oak tree growing just there?"

"Yes, yes, *yes!* All of it! How can I make you understand? Everything—the big things, like your being born when you were, like the building of the bridge just where it was, just that width—and the little things—like old Joe being asleep when you got here, so that even when you were tired you climbed the steps rather than bother him. Like the first phone call you made being an arrangement to take care of Percival's goats! You're you, damn it; but today, you've had to be you more than ever before. In every way that's important because you've got to realize who you are!"

HER INTENSITY was like the radiation from a cherry-red ingot, a thing to narrow the eyes, against which to throw up futile hands. He shook his head in bewilderment. "Why do you go on with this?" he asked in genuine curiosity. "What's in it for you? Lady, how crazy can you get?"

She wrung her hands. "I can't tell you who you are," she mourned. "I can't, I can't. . . because if I did, that little wrinkle in your silly head would kink up and switch out all the circuits. You've been holding that knowledge locked up in your stubborn skull for years, and you won't look at it. You're born to the part, bred to it, trained for it, and you won't make the simple admission to yourself." She knitted her brows. Her full lower lip sucked in and her white teeth came down on it. She lowered her head and sat tensely, and a crystal tear swelled out under her long lashes and lay twinkling on her high dark cheekbone.

He went to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "You've had a tough time, Miss Morgan," he said. His voice shook, and he realized with a shot of fury that her breakup had affected him more profoundly than he thought he was capable of.

She took his hand and pressed it against her wet cheek. "You're such a wonderful fool," she said brokenly.

He didn't know how his hand slid from her cheek to her throat. Her head came up abruptly and he found his eyes inches away from hers. Down, down in her eyes something glowed and called and promised. In those incredible eyes was a hunger, a yearning, and an overwhelming gladness fighting, fighting to emerge.

He stood like that for minutes. Finally he said hoarsely, "This won't gain you a thing. It won't make me

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believe a word of that. . . . .of yours." The word he used was filthy, viciously used.

"I know," she whispered. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. . ."

And so the full spectrum was completed, and he was himself more than he had ever been before.

LYNN YAWNED. The office was swept. The files were in order, the furniture dusted, the waiting room davenport vacuumed and plumped, the panelling oiled. The bills were paid. The phone almost never rang, and when it did all she could do was note the caller's name and promise that Mr. Guinn would call back when he returned.

"Hey—Had! Are you—" There was a step.

Lynn leapt to her feet, smoothed her hair, and ran to the waiting room.

He was there, tall, stooped, a patch on his temple and a clump of bandage on his neck looking like a misplaced tuft of his cotton hair.

"Garry! Garry—oh!"

She was in his arms before he knew it. She hugged him until he grunted, put him away at arms' length, ran eager rapid fingers over his lips and cheeks.

"Wait a minute, hey—" he spluttered. He colored violently. "Lynn, I was hoping. . . I was thinking of some way to maybe see you again sometime. . . . I didn't figger that— Gee. Hey."

"You idiot, you fool you," she crooned. "Darling, sit down. You must be tired. I thought you'd be in the hospital for another week. I've missed you so! You don't know, you just— oh, Garry, am I making a fool of myself? Am I?"

"Gosh," he said. "I don't think so." He put his hands awkwardly on her shoulders. "I think this is all right."

She spun in close to him, put her cheek on his chest. His heart was going like a riveting gun. They sat on the davenport and at last he kissed her.

AT LENGTH he came up for air. "Ain't felt like this since I won the sack race at the county fair," he said. "Where's Had?"

"I don't know," she said.

"You working here now?"

She nodded. "He wanted me to, since that day. You know. He told me to call him and I did and he wasn't there. I felt real bad. And about ten in the morning old Sam came around. He brought me a note from Mr. Guinn and the keys. He said Mr. Guinn had sent him up to take care of Percival's goats—"

"He would," said Garry.

"Yes, and Mr. Guinn had come up early in the morning and told him to go."

"What did the note say?"

"I'll show you." She skipped into the office, opened a file drawer and came out with a rumpled piece of paper. "I'll read it."

" 'I've got some thinking to do. I'll be back shortly after I arrive. Don't look for me. Here are the keys. Straighten up the place for me. You'll find money in the top drawer of the desk. If you find any bills, pay them. If you get any calls, stall them. Take fifty a week for yourself and give Garry anything he needs.' Garry, I'm to give you anything you need."

"Haw!" grinned Garry. "He thinks of everything. That all?"

"No. 'If you see that Morgan girl, tell her I still don't believe her, but. . .' Here the writing gets all squiggly. '. . . but I'll keep looking until I find what she's after. And I almost think I might.' That's all."

"Have you seen the girl?"

"No. She hasn't so much as called. Who is she?"

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"The most..." He flushed. "I like you better," he said lamely.

"You just better!"

"I bet I know where he is," said Garry. "Though maybe he wouldn't want to hang around there now. Still..."

"Where?"

"Still up there with the goats. He used to say that if ever he got mixed up in too much detail, that was the place to go. Said nobody could think little things up there."

"That's where we'll start looking," said a voice, and it laughed.

Garry and Lynn sprang apart, and then Lynn cowered up close against Garry.

Standing in the doorway was a dark, spare man with cold black eyes. His left arm was in a splint, though not in a sling. His jacket was draped over his left shoulder, and its drape gave him a chilling, vampire look. In his right hand was a heavy automatic.

"Mordi!"

"The whole thing suits me fine," said Mordi. "Nothing's going sour this time, buster. I want to be the first to congratulate you. You got a chick that will look at you, and I got a gun that will look at the chick. There's nothing you can do so fast that I can't—" He described the process of shooting Lynn in terms that made Garry's lips go white.

"What do you want?"

"Same thing your boss wants. Either I get it first or he does. If he does, I get it right afterward. Come on, lovebirds. We're taking a trip." His black eyes slitted. "And look, little smarty, you better just follow my instructions and not pull another fast one, because I'm not holding this gun for fun."

Garry took a step toward him and Lynn flung her arms around him. "Garry, don't, don't..."

GUINN THREW the old book aside and stretched. "Morning, Matty," he smiled.

The nanny stretched her long neck further inside the cave. *"Eh-eh-eh!"* she answered.

"Okay, okay."

He rolled off the goat-hair mattress and stooped to go through the entrance. The nanny skipped away from him and stopped again a few feet out in the clearing. *"Eh-eh."*

"I'm coming, honey."

He followed the goat through the neck of woods to the meadow. "Oh, for Pete's sake! Can't you stay out of trouble? You want to grow up to be a detective?" He strode over to the ruins of an ancient fieldstone wall. Tangled in a whip-vine was a week-old kid. Its clumsy thrashings had brought it under a flat stone which had fallen across a rock and a stump in such a way that the little animal was caught, painlessly but effectively, under the stone with its legs spraddled out and its silly head springing up out of the shrubbery like a barrage balloon. "Up you come," said Guinn, heaving the rock away. He picked up the kid and freed its legs from the vine. It bawled shrilly, and the nanny fretted impatiently beside him. He set the kid down and it staggered to the nanny and hooked on to a teat with exaggerated smackings and droolings and a series of frantic, contented little grunts. Guinn chuckled and walked away.

The mist was a sea which had turned the hills into a wind-borne archipelago. There had been sun up here for two hours, but the valleys were still submerged, asleep. Guinn breathed the good air and let his gaze reach and reach into the indeterminate area where mist and sky met. Eight days of this had brought a great peace and purpose to him, and for forty-eight hours now he had even forgot-

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ten that he was out of cigarettes.

The goats were company and a modicum of trouble, anchoring him to a duty. The sky and the stars and the sun and rain were things he could drift in, but the goats never let him lose himself. It was a good place to be, a good way to be.

And the books...

"...There was a man spawned by the powers of darkness, born of a virgin, destined to be the antichrist. And the virgin Blaise told her confessor, who believed when others would not, and baptized the child, taking him from the control of his dark father..."

"...asleep under a rock in Barenton in Brittany amongst the hawthornes. And when the rain fails them, then do the peasants call to him, and strike the rock, and he calls down succor for the thirsty land..."

(*What was it he had heard about Barenton? Oh yes; when that Morgan girl had first come in: "Reckon it'll rain tomorrow?" and she had said, "Not in Barenton." And he had asked "Where's Barenton?" and she had said "Sorry. Classical reference. There's a hawthorne bush there."*)

"...a precious stone is brought to earth by angels, and committed to the guardianship of a line of kings. It is self-acting and food-providing, and the light issuing from it extinguishes the light of candles. No man may die within eight days of beholding it, and the weeping maiden who bears it retains perennial youth..."

(*So if there's a drought at Barenton, he's no longer under the stone...*)

He went back into the cave to read some more. Lovely, lovely stuff, those legends. What had turned him from them?

(*The echoes in his mind, the jeering kids at school. The smug young substitute teacher who had labelled his desk after an absence "The Siege Perilous"—the old name given the empty place at a great table when a knight was out searching for the... for the...*)

BEFORE noon he heard the scuttle of hooves and the sharp snort of the big billy called Bucko.

He ran outside. Bucko was on the high bluff behind the cave. Guinn scrambled up the rocks. "Easy, Bucko," he said. Bucko turned to him and back toward the forest, his great head high, his heavy horns curving down and back so that the tips all but touched his massive shoulders.

Guinn stood up and peered. He could see nothing, hear nothing—wait; there was a sound. A distant groan, a complex sound.

It was the whining of a car in low gear, travelling rough ground so that the driver's foot bounced on the accelerator.

The sound came closer. Guinn automatically reached for his armpit and cursed. His gun was in the cave with his clothes. He hadn't had them on in four days; why bother? The goats didn't mind...

He turned to go down when a brilliant flash caught his eye—the sun on chrome. Then he knew that by the time he gained the cave again the car would be in the clearing. Strangers or friends—fine. He could put something on and come out to greet them. But if this visitor were no stranger, and no friend...

He'd take his chances out here in the open.

The car pulled into the clearing. Guinn knelt behind the gray peak of rock that jutted up like a chimney, and froze. From the ground he would look like another conformation of the rocks silhouetted against the bright sky.

The car door opened. It was a Nash

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sedan. Garry was driving. He got out and walked straight away from the car for perhaps ten feet when, at a low growl from the car, he stopped. He stood still, trembling. Even from that distance Guinn could see the sweat standing out on his forehead.

The rear door opened. Lynn got out. Her face was chalky, and her red-gold hair was vivid against it. She was staring straight ahead, and her eyes were as round as an auger-hole.

BEHIND her came Mordi, crouching, watchful. He kept an automatic steadily on the girl. Guinn could hear his voice clearly as it grated, echoed among the rocks.

"All right, cottonhead. Peek inside. If he's there, call him out."

Garry stood still, and the torment on his face was indescribable.

The automatic barked, and a slug whined twice in a crazy double ricochet. Garry whirled. Lynn snatched at her skirt, whimpering. She fingered a bullet hole in her skirt, low on her hip. "No!" she cried to Garry. "It didn't touch me!"

"The next one will," promised Mordi faithfully. "Go on, cottonhead."

Garry stalked forward like a zombi. Mordi closed with Lynn, putting the muzzle of his gun against her back. They followed.

Garry stooped and disappeared in the cave. He was out in a moment. "He isn't there."

"He's been there," said Mordi.

"No."

"You're a liar." He shoved Lynn so hard with the gun that she stumbled. Mordi stood back until she was on her feet again. Then he snapped, "Inside, Sister!" He pushed her roughly into the opening. "You," he said to Garry, "stand right where you are, where I can see you. One step any way, and I start shooting." He ducked into the cave.

Guinn was suddenly conscious of pain in his hands, and he took them off the rock. One fingernail was broken and bleeding. He looked down. Garry was standing stiff and trembling in the clearing in front of the cave-mouth. Guinn thought of leaping down from the rock, landing on Garry, bearing him away from the cave-mouth, and then realized that it wasn't Garry that Mordi would start shooting at.

He looked around frantically.

There was a movement in the wood.

Someone, palefaced, slender, stood in the shadows. Clad in a mottled green cloak, she was all but invisible. When his eyes rested on her face, it relaxed visibly, as if she had been standing in an agony of tension, waiting for him to see her.

"Morgan!"

(*The memory flitted through his tortured mind. "What's your first name?" "Morgan." "All right, if you don't want to tell me."*)

"Morgan..." he breathed. "Morgan le Fay..."

She nodded. She raised something in her hands—a three-foot clump of evergreen with yellow-green flowers, a cluster of white berries...

(*"...and when the missal shall be found upon the oak, then shall the Druid sever it with a golden knife. And sacrifice shall be made, the living blood feeding the roots of the tree..."*)

She stepped out into the clearing at the side of the outcropping, and with one clean sweep of her arm, she threw the mistletoe.

GUINN stood, stretched, and caught it. Two fierce thoughts collided in his mind. The first was that this was no time for kissing games; he'd a damn sight rather had an automatic rifle than this shrubbery. The other

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sprang from the remembered passage in Percival's old book: "...*when the missal shall be found upon the oak, then shall the Druid...*"

Druid. The Druid.

Percival had muttered, through his tattered tongue, something about the Druid. The one Guinn was to find. The one who had a golden knife, who had said "When you admit you know me, you shall seek me out."

His name! What in time was his name?

The hawthorne bush...under a flat stone in Barenton, in Brittany, he sleeps.... But there is a drought in Brittany. He sleeps no longer.

Percival's bloody wreck of a mouth floated before his eyes: *"Am-ghozhi-ush..."*

"Amgro — Ambrozhi — *Ambrosius. Merlin Ambrosius!*"

In his mind, he screamed it, over and over.

Hollowly, Mordi's voice boomed out below! "You lying bastard! He was here! His clothes, his gun—I'll teach you to lie to me!"

The automtic roared once and again. Coming from the cave, it sounded like artillery. Garry put his arms out, and on his face was an expression of delighted amazement that distorted itself into a tormented, rubbery grimace. "But, Lynn," he said softly. He looked down at his chest, and suddenly there were two bright splotches on his shirt. Chin on chest, he vomitted blood on the splotches and toppled.

A horrible garble of sound came from the cave—Mordi's roar of laughter and Lynn's terrible shriek. She bolted out into the open. Mordi was after, on her in two bounds. He twisted one arm behind her until she fell to her knees, then struck her on the back of the neck with his splinted forearm. She collapsed without a sound.

Guinn uttered a low growl—precisely the sound made by a furious mastiff. He tensed and sprang—

And he couldn't move.

He looked up.

STANDING beside him, with one gigantic arm extended and an expression of perfect calm on his dark face, stood the Druid—the man he had seen cut the mistletoe from the oak tree.

"You called me," he said. His tones rang, but somehow Guinn knew he couldn't be heard by Mordi.

"Let me go," said Guinn between his teeth. "Damn you to hell, let me go!"

The Druid was not touching him, but there was no question of the fact that the paralysis came from that extended arm. "Stand up," said the giant.

Slowly, Guinn stood up. "Let me go," he said again. "Garry's dying!"

"He will die if you do not do as I say," said the giant.

Guinn gritted his teeth and, as if moving in a heavy fluid, turned and glanced down. Mordi was working over Garry, lifting him, dragging him. He could hear Garry's bubbling breath and weak coughs. Peering down, Guinn saw him prop the dying man in a sitting position at the cave-mouth, facing in.

"A lung job," gasped Mordi. "You'll go slowly, buster. Which is good. There's something I'll want you to watch."

He went out into the clearing and picked up Lynn's limp form—both wrists in one hand, a twist under her so that she was draped over his right shoulder. He half carried, half dragged her into the cave. There was the sound of tearing cloth. "We'll get this out of the way, hey, smarty?"

Garry tried to speak, but blood choked him.

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Guinn whimpered in frustration as the invisible power drew at him, turned him around to face the great, calm, kindly face of the Druid.

"Your Quest," said Merlin Ambrosius. "There is nothing more important than your Quest. End your search and you shall have your heart's desire."

The calm power flowed into him from that huge face. Suddenly, without effort, he understood. He understood it all, from all its beginnings to its incredible present to all possible endings. He put up his hands and closed his eyes.

There was a flow from the Druid to his whole being, and an answering flow up through the rocks from the core of the earth itself. There was an emanation from everything that lived around him—the trees, the grass, the silent goats that stared up at him as once oxen stared up at a Star. Butterflies sank to the earth and were still, and all the birds were with him, silently striving.

IN HIS empty hands he felt a weight. He pulled his mind together and threw it all into a mighty effort; and his thumbs curled over something carven, and there was a high center of gravity there, so that he must balance what he held.

Then he knew it was done, and that out of himself and the earth and all things which had ever lived, the Search he had made all his life (most of it unwittingly) was over. He and his substance had been the assembly point for the thing which had left its mysterious mark on all histories and all myths.

He opened his eyes, and was not dazzled by its light, though it was far brighter than that of the high sun.

It was a chalice, apparently filled with wine. It was infinitely graceful, and each curve and carven line had a basic meaning.

There was a clinking and a rustle, and a weight on his shoulders, and a mighty, comforting burden around his waist. He found himself clad in golden chain-mail, marvelously made. It was covered by a long white silken surplice, and it blazed in the light of the unbelievable stone set in the cup.

"Will you yield it to me?" asked Merlin. His great dark eyes were full of years and hunger and...and supplication. There was no power in him to take this cup.

Guinn turned, looked down. Garry sagged against the rocks.

But Guinn was free now. He leaped. He had one brief glimpse of Merlin's pleading hands,—and then he struck the ground jarringly.

"Mordred!" he cried in a great voice. "Come out!"

The answer was a shot that roared from the open throat of the cave. Guinn saw, to his amazement, a .45 slug appear in midair three inches away from the cup he still held, and flattening, fall to the ground.

Mordi had apparently fired before he looked, for he now came out of the cave. His clothes were disheveled and his dark face was flushed. "Well, well. If it isn't the pure boy himself, all dressed up for Sunday. All right—give it here."

From the corner of his eye, Guinn saw Morgan moving forward, like a stalking cat.

"Throw down that gun," said Guinn.

Mordi laughed. He raised the gun and sighted it carefully at Guinn's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The gun bucked in his hand.

HE STARED at it, unbelievingly. It was melting. It was falling together like a water-filled balloon with a fast leak. It flowed and dripped

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down and ran between his fingers. There was no heat. It simply melted.

He looked up, saw Morgan. She had a strange, luminous smile on her face, and was looking up at the peak of the rock. Mordi looked up too.

Merlin stood there, his arms folded. "Would you kill the bearer of the Grail?"

Mordi cursed. He shook his fist at the giant and bellowed: "I, Mordred pen Dragon, of the true line of the Kings of pen Dragon, Guardians of the Grail, I am your master, Merlin Ambrosius, and you are committed to my service. I command you to deliver it to me!"

Morgan gasped. Guinn, startled, looked at her. "It's true, it's true," she keened. Tears streamed down her face.

"Quickly," she said. She ran to him. "Give me the Grail. You can't kill while you hold it." He hesitated only a fraction of a second, and then thrust it into her hands. Her face matched the Grail's radiance as she took it.

Mordi made a lunge for her, but she skipped back out of the way, and that was when Guinn's fist hit him. It bowled him right off his feet and up against the rock.

Guinn leaped on him. Mordi, with his back to the rock, lashed out with both feet and caught Guinn on his mailed chest. Guinn went flying backwards, to land in a tangle of surplice and chain, with his heavy two-handed sword twined into the heap. Mordi leaped on him, kicked at his head. Guinn ducked, and the heel of Mordi's shoe cut a long crease in his scalp. Guinn rolled over, got his feet under him and tossed the surplice back out of the way. He advanced on Mordi.

"Merlin, your protection!" screamed Mordi.

"To my sorrow," said the giant, and his voice was like the theme of a dirge. He threw up his hands.

Guinn loosed a straight right that had all the power of his blood, bones and hatred behind it.

And it was as if there were a wall of plexiglas between him and Mordi. The first bounced off nothingness, and the diverted blow threw Guinn down on one knee. His arm tingled to the shoulder. He bobbed to his feet and circled, warily. He rushed, and was again warded off.

"Now this," said Mordi, "is real fun." He dropped his hands. "Come in again, brother bastard. Did I ever tell you how many guys tried to be your father?"

FROM THE cave-mouth, Garry coughed, and from the sound of it, it would be about his last. Morgan, carrying the Grail, darted to him, pulled his head back, thrust the glowing chalice in front of his glazing eyes. Over her shoulder she cried, "Your sword! Use your sword!"

The sword, to Guinn, was no more than a nuisance. He hadn't had time to look at the buckle nor to fumble with it, or he would have shucked it off to get it out of the way. But so far Morgan had been right. He backed off and drew the sword. Merlin and Morgan, having seen such things done before with skill, must have been appalled. Guinn had to run it out of the scabbard hand under hand down the blade before he could get it all the way out.

He got his hands on the long hilt, and the weapon seemed to take on a life of its own. Mordi staggered back a pace or two and raised his arms.

"Merlin—protect me!"

The glittering blade went up, back, and to one side, and came forward in a screaming arc.

"Protect me—"

"Against *Excalibur?*" said the giant, his great voice shaking with laughter.

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And then the blade struck Mordi's neck and passed through it as if it had been a puff of smoke.

The body stood upright for fully two seconds, a pulsing fountain of blood replacing the head. Then it fell. The head rolled over twice and stopped at Guinn's feet, the eyelids batting flirtatiously, the tongue running in and out like that of a rude little boy.

Merlin came down from the crest. Guinn did not see him do it. It was as if he had disappeared from the top and reappeared at the bottom. Perhaps that was the case.

From his robe he produced a silver chain. He held out a hand to Morgan, and she came to him, walking mechanically, and stopped before him with her head down.

"On the day the Grail passes from the guardianship of the pen Dragons," Merlin intoned, "Morgan le Fay, called the Wild, shall be chained and given into slavery."

He cast one end of the chain to Morgan's slender wrist. It nestled there as if drawn by some magnetism, and by some marvel that Guinn did not understand, formed what appeared to be a broad silver link about her wrist.

"We don't have slaves," Guinn said stupidly.

Morgan knelt at his feet. "She is yours if you wish it," said Merlin.

LEANING on his great sword, Guinn reached and took the chain. "Stand up, Morgan," he said. "You embarrass me." He tugged at the chain. "Merlin, take this thing off her."

Merlin sighed. "As you wish." He made the slightest of gestures and the chain fell away. "But I warn you—she is called the Wild for good reason. She is that which appears to be something else. She is the very source of the term 'fey'."

"Wild I may be," said Morgan in a low voice, "but I feel I shall be tamed for this one's lifetime—yes, and all his others."

Guinn walked to the cave-mouth and knelt by Garry. "He's still alive! If only we could get him to a doctor!"

"There will be time," said Morgan, with a peculiar quirk to her mouth.

There was a moan from the cave. Guinn bent and peered in. He turned and took the Grail from Morgan. "Give her a hand," he said, and turned away.

Merlin stood looking hungrily at the Grail. "May I drink?"

Guinn looked at him quizzically. "I don't know, Merlin," he said honestly. "I'm going to need a whole mess of indoctrination here. I don't know what I should or shouldn't do."

"It will do nothing but good, believe me."

"Can't you wait a bit?"

"Ay." Merlin heaved an enormous sigh. "But after waiting near two thousand years, it isn't easy."

Lynn stumbled out of the cave. Her clothes were torn, and there were ugly fingernail scratches on her shoulders. She flung herself on Garry and lay in a twisted ecstasy of tortured sobs.

Morgan knelt and held her. "Give her the Grail," she said urgently to Guinn. "Make her walk with it while she weeps. While she weeps!"

Guinn gently lifted the sobbing girl. "Lynn, honey. Here. Here—take this."

Lynn strained toward Garry. Guinn tilted her face up and only then did she see his shining armor and great sword. She blinked in surprise. And then the radiance of the Grail suffused her. She put out her hands blindly and he gave it to her.

"Here, dear," called Morgan from a short distance.

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The blade sliced neatly through Mordi's neck and his head, still wearing an astonished expression, fell to the ground

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Her sobs gradually subsiding, Lynn walked to her and gave her the chalice. Morgan took it, narrowed her eyes, and suddenly the astonished Lynn was arrayed in a beautifully draped Grecian dress.

"Now, what was that for?" asked Guinn.

Merlin smiled. "Don't you remember the qualities of the Grail? 'The weeping maiden who bears it shall retain perennial youth.' Morgan is a woman with the values and compassions of a woman."

"Oh, yes," said Guinn devoutly, remembering his last meeting with Morgan. "Merlin, help me out of this hardware."

"So be it," said Merlin. He reached out and took the sword, and the golden chain-mail vanished, surplice and all.

"Hey!" Guinn yelped, and dove into the cave. He found his clothes and pulled them on.

"HOW DO you feel, boy?"

They were in the car, working gently down the switchback road toward the town. Garry lay on the wide back seat, with his head on Lynn's lap. Morgan and Guinn were in front. (Merlin, who scorned any mechanical transportation, was left behind "to take care of the goats," he had said. Morgan had explained to him that old Sam would find the goats in an empty lot near his place in town. "You'll understand how, one day.")

Garry grinned weakly. "I feel pretty damn itchy," he said. "But I'm gonna be all right."

Guinn glanced quickly at Morgan and she nodded. "He will be. No man can die within eight days once he's seen the Grail."

Guinn glanced into the rear-view mirror again. There was no doubt of the fact that Garry was alive and chipper.

"Okay," he said, "I've been in the dark altogether too damn much. Let's have it. Where did all this start?"

She smiled, and touched his shoulder. "It's a big thing and requires big thinking, darling."

"I can try."

She settled back in her seat. "Well, first, you've got to get used to the idea of a race of beings so enormous, so powerful, that you can't fully comprehend them. You just have to know they're there."

"Gods?"

"Do ants think elephants are gods? Do birds think locomotives are gods? By all means believe in God, but if you do, do Him the justice to believe that he is a God to the Great Beings as well."

"Theology later," said Guinn. "Go on."

"When it became evident that this planet would support such as we, the Great Ones supplied guidance for us. They put it on earth and went on. It is not their custom to stop and watch a civilization grow. They do what they do in order to prevent imbalances that might disrupt little corners of the universe. Once a race in this very system blew up its planet, you know. Their balances prevent that. Or they should. And now they will again."

"What is this—guidance?"

"A permeating, controlling force for each of the great basics of life: Growth and decay. A better way of putting it is the anabolism and catabolism which together comprise metabolism. There is a force that builds and a force that destroys; one that delivers heat and one that absorbs it. It's light and dark. It's *ying* and *yang*, the oldest symbol known to man—a circle divided in two by the S-shaped line inside of it, one half light, one half dark."

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"Good and evil."

"No!" she said explosively. "Not that! Good and evil are erroneous human concepts that derive from the terrible mistake that was made here."

"What mistake?"

"Mythology contains many a mention of it, though few regard it as the disaster it was. You see, only one of these forces has been fully operating on earth. The other is crippled, subdued."

"What happened?"

MORGAN wrinkled her brow. "First, let me explain what the effect of this imbalance is. If you put a cup on a table, and extend your hand to pick it up, you are moving directly toward an established aim. If you shove your arm all the way, as far as it will go, you'll push the cup all the way across and send it crashing to the floor on the other side. Yet no one can deny that your force was applied to the desired end, in the right direction, with the correct motivations.

"There is nothing evil or dangerous or harmful on this planet except excess. There's no such thing as a deadly poison; there's just too much of a poison. Too much pleasure is pain; too much fear (a fine survival characteristic) or too much anger (and that's another) means madness."

"I think I see. Then which of these powers was crippled?"

"The power of darkness—destruction—anabolism."

"You're out of your head! This planet's loaded with it!"

She shook her head sagely. "It's building—building gone out of control. It's the cause of technology's outstripping the spirit. Every nation that smashes every other nation does it through a desire to construct something—a political philosophy, an empire, a personal fortune or a personal power. It's construction that's killing us off. It's cancer!"

"I never thought of it that way."

"Humans don't. How can they? They're born to it. But that can all be changed. It's up to you."

"Me?"

"You. Only you have the power to give the Grail to Merlin."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Remember your reading about him? What was his parentage?"

"He was—he was born of a virgin."

"That's right. That is the way the guidances are placed on a planet. Merlin's the antichrist—yes. But don't recoil from that word. I tell you it has nothing to do with evil—everything to do with balance."

"What would the world be like with that force in it?"

"That requires a whole new system of thought. It's hard to put into human language. Have you ever heard of someone committing a crime for his own benefit?"

"All the time."

"Well, try to imagine a culture in which it would be impossible to construct that sentence, because 'crime' and 'benefit' couldn't exist in the same idea-sequence!"

HE WAS quiet for a long time. At last he said, "Mankind as a unit of free things, eh? Each with the full consciousness of the whole species?"

She shrugged. "Action is a light force, inhibition a dark one. The name you have for rational inhibition is conscience. Imagine all mankind with a cohesive conscience, and you'll get the picture."

Guinn wet his lips. "And what about you? And the Druids?"

"There's a long word for me. I'm a metempsychotic. I get transferred complete from one body to another,

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with complete memory. That's how I can do the things I do. None of it's magic. It's just that for me there have been no dark ages. It's all soundly scientific. The money in your wallet? A kind of teleportation. The chair that moved by itself? Telekinesis.

"The same thing's true of the Druids. 'Druid' isn't the name of a religious sect, by the way; it's a title, like 'chancellor' or 'minister'. They're metempsychotics too, but for the dark powers. I'm neutral. I imagine I'm a sort of recording device for the Great Ones."

"And how did the one force get crippled?"

"These guidances are put among humans in human terms. The antichrist was baptized! His mother confessed her visitation to a man who had the power to do it. And that is Merlin—fully possessed of the dark powers, but unable to use them for their intended purposes!"

"And the Grail?"

"Pure and simple, a power source. That jewel is a reservoir of vital energy. It was left in charge of a line of kings—the most cohesive form of authority at that time—and one of them, the revered Arthur Pen Dragon... I hope I'm not knocking over any childhood idols."

"Not mine," said Guinn sullenly. "King Arthur was a petty, self-righteous little martinet with a weak mind and a strong arm. He fell in accord with a renegade Druid who got him to turn the Grail completely over to the powers of light. It shouldn't be denied them, of course; but neither should it be monopolized. The Grail itself, in its symbolized chalice form, was put into an immaterial form, keyed to the very special aura of a certain kind of man, a man *who couldn't exist as long as the dark powers were crippled!*

"So we—Merlin and I—searched until we found suitable material, and then made what environmental changes we could until we got one. You. Percival almost made it, but not quite. He wasn't—well—dirty enough."

"Thanks."

"It's been tough sledding. Merlin had to keep his powers under forced draft by any means he could. That ritual you saw is one of the ways. The combination of auras of hypnotized animals, a virgin, oak, mistletoe and fresh-killed mammals is a tremendous recharge. With the Grail it won't be necessary."

"And Mordi?"

"A madman. Happened to be a genealogist and found out that he was of the true pen Dragon stock—the last of the pure line, most fortunately. Got to fooling around with old rituals and found that the Druids, even Merlin himself, were bound to him. He wanted the Grail as a personal power-source—which, God knows, it certainly is."

GUINN DROVE thoughtfully for a while. Then, "I called him Mordred."

Morgan laughed. "There may be more pattern behind this than anyone—even Merlin and I—know. For we have a Gareth and his Lynette; we had a Percival, the good man who almost had the Grail. And Mordred, the deputy King who turned so evil."

There was a gasp from the back seat. Lynn said, "Mordi—he saw the Grail. He'll live eight days?"

"At least," said Morgan cheerfully. And Guinn, holding the wheel, saw a flash of that bodiless head, blinking and tonguing up at him. Then he thought of Garry propped up against the cave entrance, dying, and watching... and he drove without speaking.

"So it's up to you, chum," said

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Morgan. "Give Merlin the Grail, and restore some balance to this rock or don't, and we'll keep on building Babel."

"Excalibur and the atom, is that it? Wait. The atom bomb is a disruptive dark-power device if anything ever was. Right?"

"Right," said Morgan. "A feeble victory for Merlin's side. It's the H-bomb we're worried about. That's *fusion*—that's building. Darling, if you give Merlin the Grail, that damned thing, . . won't . . . work!"

Garry said, weakly, "Hey, boss. Just who are you?"

When Guinn didn't answer, Morgan laughed and said, "He's Hadley Guinn. He got his last name from the only name anyone knew his mother by. It was Guinevere. He called himself Hadley because he got sick and tired of getting kidded about his real name." She hugged him. "In a couple thousand years, he'll get over that."

Guinn took a deep breath and said it, all by himself—the one word that had been anathema to him all his life, that had poisoned the whole Round Table legend for him.

"Galahad," he said. "By God, I'm Galahad, that's who I am!"

And when they test the H-bomb, you'll know what he decided.

THE END

MIND OVER MACHINE

By

E. Bruce Yaches

THE HUMAN brain is getting competition, mechanical-wise. One of the two most remarkable machines in the world is the Selective Sequence Electronic Calculator, made by the International Business Machines Corporation. The other one is the famous differential analyzer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

One of the feats of the IBM mechanical brain is to multiply in one-fiftieth of a second, 14 digits by 14 digits to get a 28-digit result. It can multiply together 50 different pairs of 14-digit numbers in one second. It can divide 33 pairs of 14-digit numbers in one second, and can add a 19-digit number to another 19-digit number in 1/3500 of a second.

In only a few minutes, it can perform 9,000 multiplications, 10,000 additions and subtractions, and more than 1,800 values from trigonometric tables. It solves the most intricate problems in the theory of numbers—the theory of the complex variable and plays with extremely difficult Gamma and Beta functions of advanced calculus.

In 103 hours, it has solved a series of differential equations in nuclear physics that would take a scientist 100 years to do with pencil and paper.

The brain's calculations are periodically checked by two parallel tapes, each doing the same problem by a slightly different method.

For those of us who are beginning to get a complex regarding the superiority of the mechanical brain, the IBM advises that at best the machine is only a tool to save the scientist years of time which can be better put to creative thought for helping humanity.

Mr. Thomas J. Watson, chairman of the board of IBM, says about the calculator: "This machine will assist the scientist in institutions of learning, in government, and in industry, to explore the consequences of man's thought to the outermost reaches of time, space, and physical conditions."

Now for the other extreme: The world's smallest and dumbest mechanical brain was invented about a year ago by Edmund C. Berkeley, a Columbia University electrical engineer.

About the size of a suitcase, this example of electrical stupidity has been christened "Simple Simon". Since its knowledge of digits is limited to the number 3, it can't figure any higher. Using the telegraph tape method, and 48 pounds of vacuum tubes plus other electrical equipment, it can add 1 and 1, and even 1 and 2, but when asked to add 2 and 2, it lights up its red distress signal.

It took five months to make Simon, and it cost Mr. Berkeley $540. But the inventor is not discouraged. According to him, Simon will grow up some day and be able to work on "real problems".

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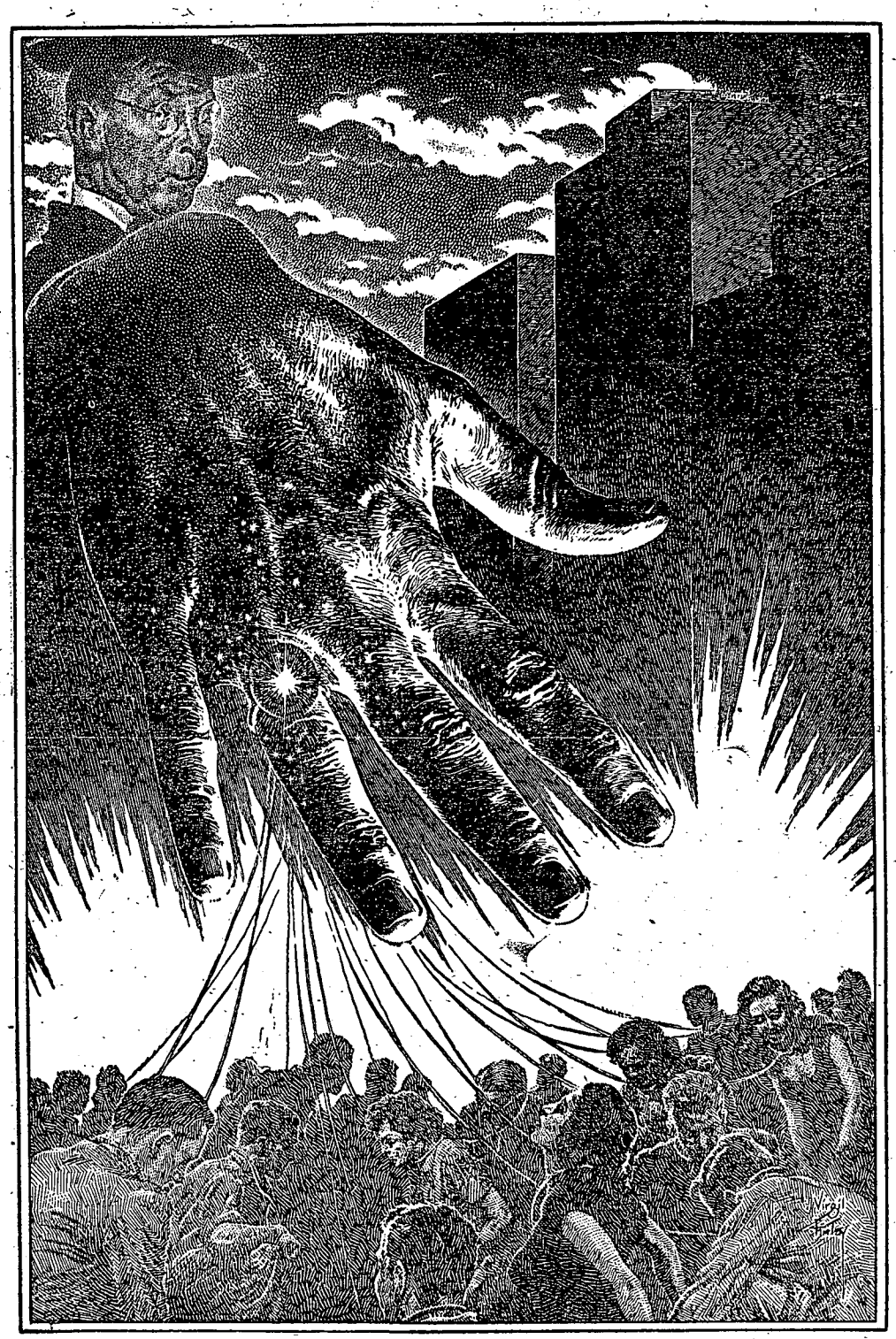

The indescribable longing on their faces was reflected in the glow of the emerald stone

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WITH THIS RING...

By Dallas Ross

With a twist of his ring, Newton owned the Universe, which should have been enough to make him happy. But he forgot one thing . . .

NEWTON BROWN turned to the passenger sitting in the seat nearest the window and said politely, "I beg your pardon, but could you tell me what year it is?"

The other had been staring out at the scraggy, bedraggled palms and at the endless succession of tiny fruit, vegetable, olive and souvenir stands. He said, "Huh?"

Newton Brown repeated, "Could you tell me the year?"

"You kiddin', Jack? It's nineteen fifty-one." He gave the wistful appearing little man a long searching look, then went back to the scenery.

"Fine," Newton Brown said. "I always like 1951; but, if you don't mind, just one other thing. Where is this bus going?"

The double-seat's other occupant closed his eyes for a second, as though in pain, then opened them and looked around at Newton Brown again. He stared at him for a long time. "You can't be a wise guy," he said finally. "You're too little to go around cracking wise. Maybe you're a crackpot."

Newton Brown repeated, "Please, where is the bus going?"

"It's going to L.A., Jack. The City of Lost Angeles."

"Ummmm. Thank you," Newton Brown said. "That will be nice. It's been a rather long time since I've been in Los Angeles." He added, as though to himself, "It's always a different time and a different locality."

His seat companion said bitterly, "Jack, you better start gathering up your marbles."

They rode in silence the rest of the way to the Union Terminal, and the highway fruit stands and palms gave way to miles of drab streets of the unglamorized sections of the Baghdad of the West.

As the passengers disembarked to lose themselves among the teeming hundreds in the bus center, the driver stood at the door and amiably exchanged goodbyes with those of his riders he'd made acquaintance with on the long trip.

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NEWTON BROWN was last. As he stepped down from the bus, the driver frowned in puzzlement and said, "I don't remember you. Where'd you get on, sir?"

Nature hadn't cut out the little man from the material of heartiness, but he said now, with a weak attempt at joviality, "That makes two of us, I guess. I'm not quite sure where I got on, either."

The frown had become a scowl. "Do you have your ticket stub, sir?"

"Ummmmm. I'm afraid not."

"Sir, I'm afraid you'll have to pay your fare. I don't know exactly where you sneaked—"

Newton Brown was searching through his pockets. He came up with thirteen cents, a pocket comb with three teeth missing, four keys on a ring and a tiny knife. He looked up at the driver and essayed a wry smile. "It would seem that—"

The driver looked down at the little man's hands and his face went suddenly pallid. He blurted, "I. . .I didn't know. Please forgive me."

Newton Brown said, "Not at all, not at all. We all are capable of error—all of us."

He turned and ambled easily toward the entrance.

The driver stood staring after him, his face still white and his body shaking uncontrollably.

The dispatcher came over to him, looking worried. "What's the matter with you, Steve? You look like you just had a brush with a ghost."

"Ghost! Listen, Jake, do you know who I just had ride in with me?"

NEWTON BROWN hailed a cab and directed the driver to the Biltmore. He had considered, momentarily, going up into the Hollywood area and stopping at one of the luxury hotels there, but he was feeling slightly fatigued from the bus ride and decided that the Biltmore would be closer and quite as comfortable.

"Here'y'are, bud," the cab driver drawled, as they drew up before the entrance opposite Pershing Square. He shot a glance at the meter. "That'll be exactly—"

The little man murmured, "Just tell your company officials that I praised your driving. You seem quite competent in the heavy traffic."

"Huh?"

Newton Brown smiled gently and lifted his hand. Then he turned and made his way toward the entrance.

The doorman, dressed like a Bulgarian Rear Admiral, took in the newcomer's attire, shabby gray suit, nondescript hat, unshined shoes—and noted his lack of luggage. He didn't bother to open the door. Instead, he scowled out at the cab which still blocked the curb, and strode over angrily.

"Get along, bud," he began to the driver. "You're blocking the entrance and—"

The other's eyes were bugging out.

"What's the matter, you sick?" the doorman snapped.

"Holy jumping jeeps," the other breathed. "Did you see who that was I just brought up here?"

The doorman snorted, "You must be new to your racket, bud; celebrities are a dime a dozen around here."

"Not *this* celebrity."

NEWTON BROWN made his way to the registration desk and faced the impeccably clad diplomat who presided there. "I'll have my regular suite," he said mildly.

The reservation clerk was curteous in the haughty manner achievable only by headwaiters and reservation clerks. He had sized up the bespectacled little man as he'd made his way across the swank lobby.

"Do you have a reservation, sir?"

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he asked, his tone insinuating that not only did he doubt that the other had such a reservation, but that he ever would have one.

"No," Newton Brown told him. "As a matter of fact, I never make reservations."

"Then I am afraid—"

Newton Brown didn't argue. He held up his right hand and let the clerk see the emerald.

"—but... but, you have a ring on your finger. Surely you know that is most illegal. No one in the whole world is allowed to wear a ring except—" He broke off and his carefully cultivated calm melted away; cold sweat broke out on his forehead. "Oh, no," he moaned.

The little man said, "Of course, I am incognito, although it seems that secrecy concerning my presence is quite difficult to achieve. However, that is no matter. For the present, I shall want tailors, a limousine and chauffeur, and—well, I am sure your manager will be able to anticipate my desires. Inform him of my presence immediately."

"Oh, yes, sire—"

"Ummmmm. Well, I assume my suite is ready?"

"Always, sire. Every major hotel in the city—in the world for that matter—reserves its best—"

"Very well, I'll go up."

The suite was acceptable. Newton Brown gave it a perfunctory inspection, then made his way to the built-in bar and poured himself a stiff shot of Metaxa, noting it was the ultra rare hundred-year-old, and then relaxed for a few moments.

Later it might be somewhat difficult for him to take a stroll, so after a bath and a quick change of clothing to something more suitable to the climate—the manager had immediately rushed tailors and haberdashers to his suite—Newton Brown made his way to the lobby again, waving aside the various flunkies who hastened nervously toward him when he made his appearance.

HE STRODE leisurely out the front entrance and crossed the street to the park to listen momentarily to some of the groups arguing Socialism, Technocracy, Communism, Fascism, Anarchism, and Thirty Dollars Every Thursday. The largest group was also the most vocal. Newton Brown stopped and listened.

In the center, a lone figure was holding out against all the others. "The DeLeonists are right," he insisted loudly. "All the rest of you are trying to reform capitalism. What we need to do is *abolish* capitalism, not patch it up."

A red-tied fanatic began screaming at him, "You White Guardist! You enemy of the Soviet Union. You—"

Off to one side, a newsboy began to call excitedly, "Extree! Emperor rumored to be in L.A. Read all about it. Emperor in L.A. Extree!"

"Oh, gracious," Newton Brown muttered. "So soon." He turned and began to make his way back to the hotel.

"The Emperor?" one of the park debators said. He took off his hat respectfully. "Do you really think the Emperor might honor us in this..."

The rest of them removed their hats—those who wore them. "The Emperor..." a breath went through the crowd.

Somebody snarled at Newton Brown. "Your hat, shorty. Didn't you hear somebody mention the Emperor?"

The colorless little man tried to hurry past—this sort of thing bothered him a little. But the way was barred by the bulk of the other.

"What's the matter, chum, don't you like the Emperor? Maybe you

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think—"

Others were beginning to crowd around, threateningly. An angry hum began to rise.

"Oh gracious," Newton Brown muttered again, peevishly. "I had hoped to at least be able to take a short walk." He held up his hand to let them see the emerald, and a moment later picked his way through their respectfully prostrated badies. As he began to cross the street to return to the Biltmore, he could hear the sounds behind him of the crowd unmercifully beating the one who had used threatening language against him.

He hesitated in the lobby long enough to ask the trembling and bobbing manager the name of the currently most popular night spot in the Hollywood-Beverly Hills area.

"The Buckingham, I would say, sire."

"Ummmm," Newton Brown said. "Perhaps you'd better inform the management of the Buckingham that I shall probably drop in tonight. And, also, it might be pleasant if you'd ring the studios and, let's see, let us say Betty, Loretta, Hedy, and possibly Judy and Yvonne—have them at my table."

"Oh, yes, sire. And possibly you would enjoy some additional entertainment—additional to the floor show?"

"Ummmm. Thank you for reminding me. Have them send Bing to sing a few songs, and possibly Bob for some comedy."

"Certainly, sire."

THE BUCKINGHAM, of course, had been closed to others than his party. But in spite of the almost super-human efforts made by all concerned, the evening had been just a trifle less than Newton Brown had expected—which was somewhat surprising to him.

The food had been quite acceptable. Of course, it hadn't been left in the hands of the club's only average competent chefs. Instead, the city had been combed for the most capable artists of the kitchen and a score had prepared his dishes. Actually, he'd had to send back only the *Raie au beurre noir*. It distressed him when he found out later than the *poisson* expert who had prepared it committed suicide.

Bing had been in good voice; Bob amusing as usual except for a slight nervousness, which was understandable in view of his audience.

It was the actresses who had bothered Newton Brown a trifle. They were a bit too pushing, too desirous of being noticed, each anxious to prove more charming than the next. He finally ran four of them off, after telling them sternly that he had no desire to read of any of them taking an overdose of sleeping pills later.

WHEN HE left the club to reenter his limousine, he noticed that thousands had gathered before the Buckingham, awaiting his reappearance and an opportunity to see him in person.

He gave them a gentle wave, to which they responded almost hysterically, and climbed into his car to return to the hotel, which had meantime been cleared of all other guests so that maximum attention of all the staff could be devoted to his care.

On the way back to the hotel, an unfortunate happening marred some of the peace of the balmy Los Angeles night. The chauffeur, of course, had been ignoring red lights as he proceeded down Sunset. He was finally confronted with a red-faced traffic officer who directed him curtly to the curb. A crowd gathered idly to hear the fun.

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The cop, conscious of the presence of the crowd, was in high form. He began by snarling to the chauffeur, "Just where is the conflagration, my man?"

The chauffeur said tightly, "My instructions were—"

The officer let loose a long string of profanity, before turning back to the occupant of the rear seat. Sitting there, blinking behind his thick lensed spectacles, Newton Brown listened for a short moment.

"Instructions, eh?" the traffic cop barked. "Who do you think you are to be giving—"

Newton Brown had had enough. He held up his hand so that the crowd could see the ring. "Dispose of him," he said mildly. Then to the chaffeur, "Proceed."

They could hear the officer's screams for mercy only for a few moments; by then the crowd had torn him to bits and the car had gone on.

At the hotel, Newton Brown noticed that there was a new doorman and a new reservation clerk. He assumed correctly that the previous two had committed *hari kari.*

IN THE morning, Newton Brown had half a dozen of the city's more prominent politicians and educators up to his suite while he lay in bed breakfasting upon *Oeuf a la florentine.* Motioning impatiently for them to get up from their knees, he came immediately to the point.

"Just what is the present international situation?" he asked, idly sipping his coffee.

It was the mayor who answered him. "Sire," he said, "there is a cold war in progress which threatens to become...er...hot, momentarily. The two most powerful nations have been on the verge of—"

"Ummmm," Newton Brown interrupted. "Get Joe on the phone for me."

He took a bite of his toast and marmalade.

He wasted little time on the conversation: "Now, I want this clearly understood. There is to be no war and this situation that prevails at present is to be ended. In fact, I am somewhat upset about the present tendency of your experiment. As I recall, when you started it, it was supposedly intended to evolve into a super-democracy, a virtual Utopia, and I was inclined to wait and see what developed. It seems to me that you've gotten far away from the road on which you claimed you were going to travel.

"Please. Don't answer me. I hope this word of warning will be sufficient." He hung up, muttering: "It seems that I can't turn my back without this whole space-time continuum going to pot."

He finished his coffee and glanced at his wrist watch. "Oh, gracious," he said, "Is it that late?" He made a quick mental calculation, then waved his hand at them. "Out. All of you, out!"

When they had bowed themselves out, he raised his right hand and took the emerald in his fingers and twisted it sharply.

MARTHA was standing above him as he sat at the tiny desk in his cellar laboratory.

"Well, Newton," she flared, scowling down at him. "What have you been up to now? I've been calling you for the past ten minutes to come and do the laundry."

"Now Martha," he began placatingly, "I was just continuing my experiments in alternate space-time continuums."

"I see," she snapped nastily. "You've been off to that alternate universe—or whatever you call it—

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of yours. Haven't I warned you? How long were you gone, you worm?"

"Only twenty-four minutes, our time; twenty four hours, theirs," he told her fearfully. "Now, dear, there's nothing wrong with my—"

"Oh, I've heard you talking in your sleep," she interrupted him sharply. "Women, liquor, mansions—everything your own way. Off where I can't get at you. I—I—" She couldn't find words strong enough. "Other women marry plumbers or bricklayers, but what do I wind up with? A little shrimp of a crazy inventor!"

"But Martha," he protested pleadingly. "I've devised a method by which I can travel through the neo-continuum to that space-time continuum, or universe, among all the infinite number of universes, which I would enjoy most. As a matter of fact," he added hopefully, "it is remarkably similar to this one in which you and I live.

"This invention can send anyone to that space-time continuum in which he would be most satisfied. Why don't you let me send you to the one you'd like best? Just for as long as you'd be interested in staying, of course."

She glared down at him, her two hundred odd pounds quivering with rage, but since she remained silent, he gathered hope. "All you have to do is wear this ring. Turn the emerald on it to the left to—"

"You worm," she snorted. "I have no desire to go to some other universe. I like this one. And what's more, for the last time I forbid you—absolutely forbid you—to ever go off again. Time after time you've done it. Why, once you were gone three hours! This is the last time, do you realize? *Give me that ring, Newton Brown!*"

She held out her hand demandingly. "The next thing I know, you'll be going off to this ridiculous alternate universe of yours and never coming back."

His eyes widened imperceptibly.

"Gracious," he said mildly. "I'd never thought of that." His left hand reached for the emerald on the ring.

THE END

WORLD WITHOUT WEIGHT

By Dale Lord

WE HAVE often asserted in the most positive terms that gravity seems to be the one scientific phenomenon which will never be conquered. We've laughed at the idea of gravity shields and weightless matter. We've felt that modern physics has fully shown the nature of gravity to be dependent upon the properties of space and inherently so, so that we will always have gravity with us.

Maybe we've jumped to conclusions.

Now this is not to say that scientists have discovered some means of neutralizing that accursed field of gravity and we're ready to hop off the Earth into the Solar System. That would be too optimistic.

But a couple of theoretical physicists have been hypothesizing in their work in atomic physics, the existence of what might be called "inverse matter"—material within the core of atomic particles which has the property of opposing gravity, of serving as a sort of gravity neutralizer. So far their work has been merely on the core of the atom, within the nucleus. Furthermore their work has been purely theoretical involving only paper work. The theory is tenuous and far from concrete. But it contains the germ of a possibility.

For the sake of discussion, imagine that it will be possible to create a material, an "inverse matter" which would neutralize gravity. At one fell swoop, space would be conquered, life on Earth would be ridiculously easy, and incredible advances in every type of science and industry would be made. Science-fiction writers have accomplished this already!

The point we wish to stress, however, is that a wedge has been driven, however slightly, into what was once regarded as an impregnable fortress. Maybe gravity will come tumbling down after all!

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FLAP YOUR WINGS, BROTHER

By Merritt Linn

EVEN WITH all modern science's new developments, no vehicle or propeller-driven airplane can come anywhere near approaching the enormous velocity of the little deer botfly, known in scientific circles as the *Cephenomyia*.

According to the noted scientist, Dr. Charles Townsend, the *Cephenomyia* has been clocked at 818 miles per hour, or a little more than 13 miles per minute. The efficiency of its wing base, and the power stored up in its muscular system are partly responsible for its speed. It flies so fast that it appears as a blurred streak which is out of sight almost as soon as it is detected.

These flies probably travel faster than the bullets which the Germans used in the first World War. The males travel faster than the females, since they are practiced in running after their women, while the females are usually heavy with ova and young. Also, the males travel at higher altitudes, thus avoiding some of the friction which the females encounter at lower heights.

To quote Dr. Townsend: "I have seen the gravid females pass while on search for hosts at a velocity of well over 300 yards per second—allowing a slight perception of color and form but only a blurred glimpse. On the other hand, on 12,000 foot summits in New Mexico I have seen pass me at an incredible velocity what were quite certainly the males of *Cephenomyia*. I could barely distinguish that something had passed—only a brownish blur in the air of about the right size for these flies and without sense of form. As closely as I can estimate, their speed must have approximated 400 yards per second."

As a matter of fact, at least one well-known designer in the aviation industry has drawn blue-prints for streamlining some of our planes in line with the form of a fly—the flapping wing, etc.—for greater speed and greater facility in movement.

IT ACTUALLY HAPPENED . . .

By Carter T. Wainwright

WE CAN assume the existence of the continent of "Lemuria"—a name first employed by the Englishman Slater for his hypothetical continent because in all of its remaining parts he found the same kind of monkeys. Lemuria rose out of the sea in the Cambrian epoch and, by filling in the Indian Ocean, extended itself from Africa to both the Indias and was joined by way of the Sunda Island with Australia, insofar as this region then existed. In all probability, a land-bridge connected West Africa with Brazil and became for a period the connecting link with the Lemurian continent. And so a complex of land was formed which extended from the region of the Amazon to Africa, Arabia, India and New Zealand.

The numerous archipelagoes in the Sunda Sea and Indian Ocean are the ruins of this continent of Lemuria which was broken up in the beginning of the Tertiary Era. The Tertiary reptiles wandered across the land from South Africa to India. Geology is forced to reconstruct such a continent; it could not otherwise explain the amazing identity of the animal and plant fossils of Madagascar with those of South India and Australia.

Another continent seems to have existed in the Pacific, connecting Australia with Central and South America. The reasons for assuming this are again the flora and fauna. The sole relatives of the Australian dasyure live, for instance, in South America: fossils and recent specimens being found in these two territories only. It is likewise to be assumed that the well-known Easter Island and the bulk of Polynesia represent the final remnants of the mountain tops of this Pacific continent which was submerged ages ago.

So—if there had been no Atlantis—man would have had to invent one. Many factors of geographical, floral and faunal nature seem to prove the fact of its former existence. Material bearing on the subject has been collected through many decades. Based on it, a land-bridge has been reconstructed, leading from Northern Europe over Iceland and Greenland to North America and a second bridge from South Africa to South America. These are the Atlantic continents of geology—and are exactly the great islands described by theosophic seers.

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THE SPOILERS OF LERN

By Clee Garson

The spaceship crew found a planet with all the comforts of home. But the food was a bit unique: for dinner you had a friend!

THE PURPLE WATER was no longer still. Ripples formed and moved outward from a force that threshed the water into foam at its center. The pole bent almost double, then straightened, and dangling from the hook at the end of it was a snow-white fish....

Paul Pratt snapped his wrists, but not quickly enough.

"Got it!" The woman's voice made him turn up in startled surprise.

She was lowering the camera and lifting her head. He caught a glimpse of hazel eyes, narrowed in laughter.

"Glad you got it," he said ruefully. The hook was empty of the fish. "Been trying for the little devil for a week now. They told me you've got to land these things in less than two seconds."

She continued to stare while she put the camera back into its case. "You're Paul Pratt, aren't you?" she asked suddenly.

Consternation showed in his eyes for an unguarded instant. She saw it and was quick to take advantage. "Of all the luck. I'd about given up. Mind if I sit with you?"

"I don't suppose you'd take no for an answer," he grumbled. "Come ahead. But if you're expecting to get another shot of the *Epithymosis Syntesis*, you'll just be wasting your time."

"I'm satisfied with the one I got she said. "Besides, the biggest fi didn't get away." She threw her le out straight before her and leaned h weight against the angles of her bac bent arms, showing off a beautif figure.

"They said I'd never find you— She stopped suddenly. The man w frightened. Of her? She thought bac quickly to all the pertinent facts sh had memorized about Paul Prat There seemed to have been a woma in his life. "I'm sorry," she said quic ly. "I guess you think me a braz hussy. I'm not really. My name. Wendy North and I'm a reporter c the *Chicago Blade*—"

"A reporter!"

The connotation implicit in his e clamation made her angry. "Yes, reporter! R-E-P-O-R—"

"T-E-R," he finished. "You don have to spell it for me."

"Well, from your well-known di like of them, I thought you migl spell it S-N-A-K-E. Now, I'm angry Darn! And you look like you cou be regular."

"I don't want to be regular," h said stiffly. He hadn't intended actin as he did. There seemed somethin different about this Miss North. Bu the mechanism of self-defense ha become instinctive with him. Nov he had added fuel to her fire.

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The tree seemed to have a face that mocked at his blocked memory, ~~that~~ laughed at him

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She wagged a finger in his face. "You just want to be left alone, don't you, Mr. Pratt? Well, that's all right with me. All I want out of you is a column anyway. About fifteen minutes and you can go back to being a private jerk."

"Is that what people think me?"

The question took her by surprise. Her finger stopped its motion and moved to her lips. "Do I detect a note of surprise in your voice?" She looked past him to the red Martian sky. "Does this mean he's human? Does this mean—"

"Miss North, if you don't mind, let's stop being childish. You touch on an active dislike when you act this way. I can't stand people of obvious intelligence acting as you do. I'm not a moron, therefore don't treat me as one. I have never presumed people thinking about me for any length of time. Now I learn otherwise. I'm curious."

She studied him openly for a long moment. Her eyes and mind had been trained to make quick appraisal. He seemed a nice-looking person, but no different from many others she'd seen, until her attention was caught by his eyes and mouth. The eyes were cool, very much alive and very, very intelligent. And his mouth, long and tilted at the corners with humor, could turn thin and angry when the mood seized him.

But the portrait of a self-absorbed man which she had expected, was not there.

"I apologize," she said. "I shouldn't have acted on hearsay. Blame it on the shock of finding you where I thought you'd be."

"That's an odd thing to say. What do you mean?"

"You know what people say about the last place to find things? I thought the last place I'd find you would be on a pier fishing. Your hobby is fishing! I knew that. But I thought fishing on a public pier, out in the open, would be the last place. . . ."

His lips lifted in a smile. "Perhaps you don't know it, but this the only public pier on all Mars where a man can sometimes find the 'disappearing fish'. All right, young lady! You win the interview. What do you want to know?"

"YOUR PERSONAL secretary let something slip shortly after you left for parts unknown. I was the one he let it slip to. He said, for one," she counted the slips on her fingers, "you were going fishing for a fish that isn't there when you get him—"

"Oh, that idiot Wuster!" Pratt broke in. "If only he'd stop trying to be clever."

"Right. Especially with Miss North of the *Blade*. And, for another, you were going to investigate the reports of a new kind of game, not found on Earth. The first was easy. There is only one Epi-whatever you call it. The second was more difficult to figure out. Matter of fact, I still haven't. That's why I'm here. My readers don't like guesses. They want facts."

"Very well, Miss North, you shall have them. My private ship, the Astra, is being readied for an expedition. I brought it here to get away from the publicity attendant to having it made ready on Earth. I am going to the planet Lern. I'm willing to bet Wuster said I was 'Going to learn something I hadn't learned before!' "

"Yes. Or something very similar. But how did you know?"

"Know the man and you know his words. I know Wuster."

"And very well, too. But let's get back to this Lern thing. Please elaborate."

"Lern is a planet member of a solar system lying in N dimension. But before I go on, will you understand what

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I'll be talking about?"

"I'll have to put it down in self-defense," she said, as she pulled a note pad from her camera case. "I'm sure it'll be Greek to me, but the *Blade* has ten million reader-viewers, and there is the possibility that some of them might want details."

"I'll make it brief for your sake," he said. "Simply, Einstein's last theory knocked the skids out of a lot of nonsense and opened the way for what is called New Science. His theory, which was later verified in a practical demonstration, boiled down to the fact that high speeds are faster than they should be. The first expedition to the Moon proved he was right; it took them less than half the time they thought it would.

"Our whole concept of space-distance had to be revised. Well, shortly after, we went to Mars, to Venus, to Mercury, and then we left our system and our universe. A couple of months ago, a ship came back from a trip that broke through the light or radiation barrier into N dimension. There was but a single man on board, a single man and the skeletons of ten others. He had eaten the others. This man, who had been the navigator, died a day after he landed the ship. But before he died, he told where he had been. The name of the planet was Lern, and someone or something had made him practice cannibalism."

She had been listening wide-eyed. "What a story! Did he say why? Did he—"

"It is a terrible story indeed," he said, breaking in. "But one you won't be able to use, I'm afraid. Take my word on it. There was only a very short period of coherency during which we got the fact I mentioned. He was in shock when he landed, and he died that way. I'm going to Lern to see for myself what had happened to him."

"Take me along," she said.

"Impossible!"

"It's a word I don't believe in," she said. "If you won't take me, I'll find someone who will. The *Blade* has all kinds of money to spend, if it thinks it can score a beat."

"Miss North, I was going to say I find you incredible, but now you're being ridiculous. There aren't ten men who have the kind of ship to make the journey. What's more, it isn't as though you were on a luxury space liner to Mars. Inter-spacial travel is rough and dangerous."

She seized on some of his words. "I don't need ten men, just one. You'd be surprised how the ear is attuned to the song of the dollar."

Suddenly, he was bitter with anger. Before she knew what was going on, he had come to his feet and was standing behind her, his face a mask of cold fury. "My error! I thought you intelligent. You're stupid and willful. Do as you wish."

She watched him stalk off, his back stiff as a poker. There was an odd smile on her lips. It said: Funny man. Dear funny man. I like you, and I think you like me....

"YOU'RE NOTHING but a chattering imbecile!"

Jerry Wuster cast an approving smile at the disapproving back and said, "Yes, sir," in a contented voice. Paul Pratt was again his old self.

Pratt continued to study the charts before him. His voice bounced off the drawing board: "Telling that Miss North what you did. Leave being clever to those capable of the art."

"But you told her even more than I did," Wuster went on in his amiable manner. "'Course, I saw her column on the video. Not even a mention of Lern."

"Censorship saw to that, no thanks to you or me. I often wonder why I

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keep you on. You can't even type. . . ."

Wuster fell to studying the toe of his right shoe. "She was attractive, I thought. A personal opinion, of course, sir."

"Please keep them to yourself," Pratt turned to deliver his edict. But he couldn't stop the flush from coming to his face. He was glad Wuster was not watching him.

"Yes, sir." Wuster lifted his eyes. They had a child-like candor in their depths. "She hired Joe Fury to fly her to Lern."

Pratt didn't bother asking the other how he knew. Jerry Wuster was the kind of person in whom you placed all confidences, as though he were a vessel of confession. Somehow, Jerry had met up with Wendy North before they shoved off, although how he had managed it was a mystery, since he had arrived only a day before departure.

Pratt dismissed the subject abruptly: "Let's forget her, shall we?"

"Of course, sir. Captain Storms should be up soon."

As though in echo to his words, the door opened and closed on a man in the undress uniform of an air officer. The silver bars of a Captain gleamed dully along the edge of one collar point.

"Greetings. Can't get over this ship, Pratt. A beauty, just a wonderful sailor."

"Thank you, Storms. I am rather proud of the Astra. About three more hours before we use the braking jets. We'll be somewhere close to where McCarthy landed."

Storms had dark eyes which seemed to reflect his every thought and emotion. Now, they were stormy as his name, and a little brooding. "Mac and I were classmates. That's why I asked for this detail. Maybe we'll meet up with those devils."

Pratt absent-mindedly pulled a pipe from a pocket and filled it. His somber stare never left Storms' face. "I know how you feel, Captain. But it's a personal feeling. We're on a bigger mission than one based on vengeance. The Condor escaped to Earth. Brian McCarthy was the only one left." He put the pipe back in his pocket. "We're coming in to get to the bottom of the mystery, what happened to the ten men with Mac."

"You're right, Pratt! It's just that I get to thinking about Mac and perspective gets distorted. I suppose I'd better get the men alerted if we have three more hours flying time. I hope it will be dark when we land."

"It will be," Pratt promised. "I made sure of it."

SHE READ the same sentence over for the sixth time, realized it, and tossed the book aside. Once more her thoughts swung to Paul Pratt. Thought he'd been so smart, telling her about the navigator and the ten skeletons and the ship which had come back from the mysterious planet Lern. Oh, he'd been smart enough, all right. He knew all along she wasn't going to be able to get the news to the public. And she'd thought him such an innocent. Well, he'd never have the chance to pull anything like that again. . . .

She grinned ruefully. He had warned her she wouldn't be able to use the information he'd given.

But though she hadn't been able to use the information, no one had stopped her inquiries. Just a warning from the editor: "We can't use it now, baby," he had said. "But they're not going to stop us from flying out to Lern; I cleared your flight this morning. And who knows? One day we'll break it, with an exclusive Wendy North byline."

Then she had met that queer duck,

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Jerry Wuster, Pratt's personal-secretary. Before she could stop herself, she had blurted out her hiring of Joe Fury. Hang these self-recriminations, she thought. It was no one's business but the *Blade's* and her's. Pratt, his secretary, and his New Science, could all go hang!

"Hiya gorgeous! Been waitin' for me, huh?"

Her head jerked up at the words, then went slowly down. She reached for the book. "That tired line went out with the movies, Fury," she said. "Can't you give your lips a rest?"

His rugged face, scarred with the marks of personal battles, showed no sign he had heard what she said. "What's wrong with my line? Nothin', I say. Gets the gee-gees alla time. From Manhattan to Mercury."

"Well, I'm not a gee-gee, whatever that is."

"That's where you're wrong. You're the best, that's what. I ain't figgered you yet, but I will! Joe Fury never misses. Guess it's maybe what you are. Never met a gee-gee reporter. You oughta look fat, forty and foolish—"

"So I'm trim, tired and thirty. Must we always discuss your affairs, Fury? Just for a change, let's talk about this interminable journey."

"What's to talk about? Three days outa Port Looma on Mars an' we get to Lern. That's all."

"Three days?" she said in a whispered aside. "Seems more like three years." Then aloud: "Are we still on the Astra's tail?"

"Like if it had skirts. You gotta remember you hired the best spaceman there is. There ain't a guy from Jersey to—"

"Jupiter," she tried to stop him.

It was no good. "That's right, gorgeous, there ain't a guy who'll say I'm wrong. Just don't you worry that pretty head about us. Up and back; I made the guarantee."

She saw him move toward the easy chair and tried a desperate maneuver. He had kept her up almost the whole of the night before relating the details of his sordid affairs. If only he hadn't been so boring. "I-I have a headache, Fury. I think I'll turn in."

"You'll miss seeing us land, gorgeous." He fell into the chair with a deep sigh. "Got Randy on controls. Good boy, Randy. Good jetman. He was with me when I made the first trip."

If he was aware of the miraculous cure his words had worked on her headache, he seemed unaware of it. He continued to regard her from under his beetle-brows. "By the way, I wanta make one thing clear. I don't care where Pratt lands, except it can't be on Flat Skull. If he lands there, we go someplace else."

"I hired you to—" she started to remind him.

"Fly for you, gorgeous, not die for you," he broke in. "Flat Skull is out of bounds."

"Does Pratt know that?"

He heaved in a shrug.

"What's wrong with it?" Her tongue tripped over the words. She felt a sudden chill and shook it off until nothing of it remained but the tremble to her lips. "What's wrong with it, Fury?"

"It's a graveyard, that's what. We came in daylight. There must have been the skeletons of a hundred ships lying on that mesa."

"Oh, no!" she breathed in horror. "Fury! Contact him! Warn him!"

He was surprised. "I thought you was going to surprise him?"

"I want to, but I want him alive for the surprise."

"Okay, gee-gee," he arose with regret. "You're payin' the freight on this trip. We got an hour yet, so he's

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got time to pick another spot."

STORMS was curious. "What's it about, Paul?"

"Fury came in on our wave length. Seems he's been on our tail all the way in from Mars. Warned us about Flat Skull." Pratt had been tamping the tobacco into his pipe. He looked up, saw Storms' questioning look, and continued: "Sorry, I forgot you're new to Lern. Flat Skull is a mesa; it's flat, treeless and a trap of some kind. There must be all of a hundred space ships piled up on that flat."

"Ours?"

"Wouldn't be surprised." Pratt turned laconic. He lit the pipe and peered at the other through a haze of bluish smoke. "Fury is a roughneck, a moron, and a pirate—so the tale goes. This friendly warning smacks of chicanery."

"Or a woman's hand," Jerry Wuster added.

"A woman?" Storms sounded interested.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Pratt said. "He wants to marry me off to any piece of baggage catches his fancy."

"A very fancy piece of baggage Miss North is, sir."

"Thinks I need the woman's hand to guide me or some-such drivel. Now, let's get back to Fury and Flat Skull. The man's right. I don't plan to land there. However, our field is not far from it. There's another mesa—surprising how much like Arizona you'll think this part of Lern, and this one's perfectly safe." Pratt looked at the clock on the wall above the drawing board. "Better ready the braking jets, Captain. Ten more minutes. . . ."

CAPTAIN HARDY Storms looked out over the level mesa. Pratt was right about the resemblance to Arizona. He moved off to the right, away from the dark mass of the Astra, and watched the twin satellites race across the sky. Their reflected light made shadows stand out strongly. There was nothing soft about this landscape, he thought. He wondered whether the inhabitants were going to be as stark and terrifying.

Pratt semeed to think so.

He turned to watch the unloading of the scientific paraphernalia Pratt had brought along. The entire crew was assisting Pratt. His eyes, trained to line, detail and construction, marveled at the wonder of the ship. When he had been told of the Astra, he hadn't quite believed it. A space ship of plastic, even to the huge jet tubes. . . .

Flame seared the sky.

Storms looked up. Another ship was coming in on braking jets. Joe Fury, no doubt. He watched the ship land and noted the ease of it, noted the expertness of the pilot. Fury might be a moron, he thought, but he was a good pilot. Damned good!

Pratt and the others were also watching the ship come in. Presently, Pratt joined Captain Storms. "I like my privacy, Storms," Pratt said. "I find it a fortress against men like Fury. But this is one time the open will be the safest place."

Storms smiled. "Think he's bent on piracy?"

"If he is, he'll soon be disillusioned. No, I happen to know exactly why he came."

"Then you've been expecting him."

"Not so soon as this. I thought another day or two would pass before he showed up. Ah. . . his cargo is being unloaded."

"A woman!" Storms exclaimed. "Nice figure, too. Wonder how she is above the neck."

"As nice as below."

Storms stopped short. "Say! I

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thought you were the prize mysoginist? You knew all along who was on board ship. Pirate! Hah!"

"He is, too, although no one's caught him at it. Not this trip, though. The girl's a Miss Wendy North, of the *Chicago Blade*."

"Reporter?"

Pratt nodded.

"Tough. It's a long ride back to Earth, especially when you have to come back empty-handed. What did she expect to find here?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But she'll tell you, make no error in that."

HE HAD forgotten how tall she was; even alongside the huge figure of Joe Fury, her height was noticeable. Now she was in conventional flying dress, but even so the curves of her body were not lost. She stepped forward to meet them.

"Surprise, surprise," she called gaily. "I'll bet you're just thrilled to bits that I've come?"

Pratt was grim about it. "I'm not surprised in the least. You're the kind of woman who'd do anything to gain your ends. As for being thrilled . . ." He let the rest fall into a void of disdain.

She turned her attention to Storms. "Your friend doesn't like me. I say it doesn't matter at all, now that I'm here, because the sensible thing would be to make the best of it."

"A reasonable attitude, Miss North."

"Wendy to you, Captain."

"Captain Hardy Storms, Wendy. Hardy, to you."

"An' what's it to me?" Fury growled. He was smiling with the words. "Nothin', I guess," he answered his own question. "Course, if I was a gee-gee . . ."

"Fury," Pratt turned to the thick-bodied man, "we have no right to tell you to leave; if it were possible to have stopped you before taking off, I would have. But get this through that thick skull of yours: Every minute you're on this place, your life is at stake."

"Hell! What'm I, a kid? Don't scare me. I been in tougher spots."

"I'm not thinking of you. It's Miss North."

"Miss North can take care of herself, thank you," she said crisply. "I came here to get to the bottom of something, and I stay until it's gotten."

"Have it your way," Pratt said coldly. "I'm going back. There's still a great deal of work to do. Coming, Captain?"

WHAT THE devil was wrong with him, Pratt asked himself? Acting like a spoiled and jealous school boy. Hang the girl! She had upset him before, and now she was up to the same tricks. There just wasn't room for her up here, and he was going to tell Storms that just as soon as the airman got over his own distemper.

The last of his equipment was being unloaded as they got back to the Astra. The moons were both out of sight now, and the grey of dawn was lightening into a new day. Storms noticed, too, how time had sped by, and issued rapid-fire orders for the setting up of fire positions.

Daybreak found them ready.

Storms had gotten over his mood. He kidded Jerry and Pratt about having to have air force breakfasts now, joked with his second about having a civilian boss, and called the group the "Lost Lerners". But Pratt noticed how often his eyes strayed to the other camp pitched a couple of hundred yards off. The girl was still in his thoughts.

"I seem to recall a valley of some kind," Pratt said while they were having their second cup of coffee. "It's just beyond this mesa."

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"A valley, eh? Do we investigate?" Storms asked.

"Yes, the valley and everything else. Hardy, you're the boss man of the military, so I'll leave the disposition of the men to you. One thing, however: Always leave enough men to guard the equipment."

"Don't worry about that. Let's see now," Storms thought for a couple of seconds, and went on: "There are fifteen of us altogether. Ten men will always stay on guard. I'll put Martins in charge of home base, and I'll go out with you and Jerry and two non-coms."

"That should do it nicely," Pratt said. "Might as well get started."

"Right."

It was Jerry who observed they were not going to be alone in their investigation. "We're going to have company," he announced. "Miss North and Joe Fury. How nice of them to want to join us."

Storms turned and called a halt. "So it is," he sounded pleased. Then he caught Pratt's look of disapproval. "Let them come. Damn it! We can't treat them like pariahs."

"No, I suppose we can't. All right."

"Going for a walk?" Wendy asked brightly, catching up.

"Call it that." Storms walked at her side. "And you?"

"Well, to be perfectly frank, I gave way to my woman's intuition. I told myself you're going looking for something and if you found it I ought to be there to see."

"And why not?" Storms asked of no one in particular. "This is a free planet."

Fury broke into hoarse laughter. "This gee-gee's the smartest I ever met. Asked her why she wanted to follow you men and she says it's the woman's place to follow the man of her choice."

"And what is so smart about that?" Jerry asked.

"She don't tell me her choice. What a dame! The only gee-gee here and she says she made a choice. Now we gotta find out who."

"No, you have to find out," Pratt said. He shook his head in disgust as he watched Storms and the girl walk ahead. Storms had his arm entwined in her's.

Suddenly they came to a halt.

The others stopped short on seeing Storms whirl and come back at a run, almost dragging the girl after him.

"Jerry, stay here with Miss North!" he commanded. "Come along and see what you make of this, Paul."

"This" proved to be a wall of invisible force. It was like pressing against air that wouldn't give, or glass that was so polished they couldn't see it. They walked for hundreds of yards in various directions, but no matter which way they went the wall lay before them.

Meanwhile, the others had come forward and individually made the same discovery, and were excitedly discussing it.

Storms compressed his lips. "I'm going to try something, Jerry."

He backed away from the invisible wall, pulling Pratt with him by the sleeve. When they were ten feet from it, he took out his automatic and aimed at the tip of a rock outcropping beyond the barrier, and fired.

The bullet abruptly materialized as a splaying blob of metal two feet above the ground in apparently thin air where the barrier was. It hung there with an attitude of "look see what I'm doing" for several seconds, then dropped to the ground.

Storms walked to it and picked it up, turning the still warm lead over slowly. On one side it was quite flat like a piece of tallow from a candle that has dripped onto a table.

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"Even slugs stopped by steel don't do that," Storms said. "They dent the steel enough to ruin the flatness."

The others had come up and crowded around, eyeing the piece of metal with wide eyes.

Pratt took it from Storms and hefted it idly. "Well, this tells us what happened to those ships wrecked on Flat Skull Mesa."

"What do you mean?" Fury asked sharply.

"It's quite obvious. When you land a ship, you land on some bit of land that you see. You gauge your landing speed to keep control, reducing your speed to nearly zero at the last minute. A hundred feet above the spot you intend landing on, you're still going at crash speed. If you ran into an invisible barrier tougher than steel..." He held up the metal for silent emphasis.

The others nodded in understanding.

There was an amazed look on Storm's face. "But that would mean this invisible wall—"

"Right," Pratt said. "It's a dome that surrounds and covers at least Flat Skull."

Fury snorted. "You're forgetting something. Those wrecks are on the ground, not hung up in the air."

A look of irritation crossed Pratt's face. He put the lead in his pocket and turned toward camp.

Wendy left the others and caught up with him, walking beside him in silence. From time to time she looked sideways at him, her lips partly opening as though she wanted to say something. When she did speak, she talked fast as though afraid she wouldn't get it out before changing her mind.

"Fury's been here before. And I'd swear he wasn't the least bit surprised about that...wall. I have a feeling that there's *something* inside that place. And he knows what it is."

"I'm glad you told me that. It confirms a suspicion that's been growing in me." Pratt turned suddenly to face Wendy. "I'd like for you to dismiss Fury and order him back to Mars, and join our party."

Wendy shook her head firmly. "That would be the worst thing we could do. I would have to sign a release, you know. It's registered in the Martian spacebooks that I'm his charterer. He has to bring me back or present a release signed by me."

"Well, sign the release and get rid of him. We don't want him around."

"No." Wendy's look was determined.

Paul Pratt came to a stop. "Either do that or stay away from our party completely. We're going to have enough trouble without having you and Fury on our necks." He frowned defiantly. "This is a scientific expedition. We may discover things that should be kept secret. Besides, it's going to be dangerous."

"Are you worried about me?" Wendy's smile was taunting, with a hint of something else.

"I would hate to have to interrupt serious investigation to rescue you from some damfool predicament you got yourself into. I'd much prefer you to get out along with Fury and his crew. I offered you the chance to join with us as a compromise to get rid of Fury, that's all."

Wendy's eyes flashed anger. "Very well then. We stay. I see what you're after. You want me hamstrung. As long as Fury's under charter to me, I can have full freedom of action. I intend to keep that freedom."

Pratt glared at her, then turned and stalked away. She watched him go, a tight little smile tugging at her lips.

WUSTER EYED the toe of his boot with professorial concen-

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tration. "If I didn't know you, sir, I wouldn't hesitate to say that your actions were dictated solely by jealousy. Not only that, they defeated their purpose most admirably."

"You'll go too far one of these days. The whole trouble with you is that you fancy yourself in the role of an English butler of the old school. You'd like nothing better than to have me acquire half a dozen offspring so you could lay out their diapers with a fancy flourish. And you're forgetting the object of this trip to Lern. We're here to find out what happened to Brian McCarthy and the Condor. Not to woo a female news reporter." Pratt jerked into his shirt angrily.

Both men turned as a knock came at the door. It was Storms. "Ready for breakfast?" he asked. "Miss North is waiting. I invited her to have breakfast with us."

"Did you have to?" Pratt sighed and continued dressing. Wuster winked solemnly at Storms as he silently handed articles of clothing to Pratt.

For the first ten minutes, breakfast was very formal in atmosphere.

Wendy North broke the oppressive silence. "Paul, I've been thinking: McCarthy couldn't have landed—he and the crew of the Condor—on Flat Skull, or the Condor would have been wrecked like the other ships."

"I know that." Pratt kept his eyes on his plate.

"And there must be some way past the barrier. It must be energy rather than matter. Maybe it shuts off periodically."

"Why don't you ask Fury?" Pratt looked up at her coldly. "You've been thinking. So have I. It seems to me incredible that with Flat Skull strewn with wreckage, any ship captain in his right mind would try to land there—unless he couldn't prevent himself. Then why were we able to avoid that trap? Was it because Fury was right behind us? Also, there's the little question of how Fury has earned a living. It would be interesting to see if the cargos of those wrecked ships are intact—"

Wendy dipped her head in frowning agreement. "Are you going to try to find out how to get through the barrier?"

"I already know how." Pratt repressed a smile and bit into a piece of buttered toast calmly.

"How?" It was Wendy, Storms and Wuster in unison.

"The first inkling came to me yesterday when Captain Storms fired that bullet at the barrier. It hung there a trifle too long before it fell. That proved to me that the barrier is a field of—" Pratt broke off, biting his lip.

"Of what?" Wuster asked, as the others hesitated.

"I think it would be wiser to discuss the nature of this thing when the press is not present."

"In that case, since I'm decidedly unwelcome, I'll leave." Wendy stood up, quivering with anger.

"Mr. Pratt," Captain Storms said, "you may be my employer and the owner of this ship; but I'm captain and in command, and I'll thank you to act like a gentleman."

"Tell this reporter to act like a reporter then." Pratt half stood and pounded the table with his fist. He turned his flashing eyes from Storms to Wendy. "I gave you your chance yesterday to get rid of Fury and join our party. You refused, so stop inviting yourself to breakfast and sticking your nose into our investigations."

"I would resign at once, sir," Storm said, his voice tight as a string. "The articles of space force me to remain captain of your ship until we land at an authorized port. Consider my resignation effective as soon as—"

Wendy drowned out his words: "You fool, Paul! I told you I can't

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dismiss Fury without endangering us all. That's no reason for you to get on a high horse and exclude me from your discussions."

"Then take your Captain Fury back to Mars and stay there!" Pratt glared at Wendy for a moment, then slowly settled back into his chair.

Wendy was looking at him, at first with puzzlement in her wide eyes, then with a sort of dawning wonder. Her voice was soft, tender. "All right, Paul." She turned and half ran from the room.

Pratt half rose, opening his mouth to call her back, then settled back. There was a smirk on Wuster's countenance.

RANDY WAS flatchested, with a sallow complexion and a sinister aura. Where Joe Fury gave the impression that he could descend on some innocent victim in a storm of violent action, Randy was the type that would silently materialize out of the shadows with a flash of silent steel that would terminate in the startled victim's ribs. They were as different as two renegades could be, with the same end effect.

He had watched Wendy stroll leisurely toward the Astra, then turned to Fury. "You gonna let Pratt beat your time?"

Fury snorted. "Maybe Pratt will let something slip and she'll say something around us that'll give away what they plan to do. I don't think they'll get anywhere here. If they do, we can turn *it* loose on them."

Randy paled, visibly. "Don't do nothin' crazy. This's different. We're on a registered trip and have to account for our passenger or we won't be able to kill our jets at any regular port again. And that would mean having to get a go-between to cash in on the stuff."

"I'm not forgetting." Fury took his eyes off Wendy's gracefully moving figure and grinned knowingly at his companion. "I never saw a gee-gee yet that didn't get suddenly very co-operative after..." His voice trailed off.

An hour later when Wendy returned the two men were stretched out on the sandy soil near their ship, apparently asleep, though she gained a strong impression that they were watching her from veiled lids.

"Captain Fury," she said sharply when she came up, "I want you to do something."

He opened his eyes and sat up. "Sure, gorgeous. Just name it."

"I want you to take off and go far enough off the planet that Pratt and Storm will think we've gone for good."

"OK. We can circle Lern and have a good time." He admired her long clean limbs openly.

A faint flush crept over her cheeks. "I'm staying here. Give me time to hide behind that knoll on the other side of your ship before you take off. Then take off and don't come back until the Astra's gone. That way I can see what goes on without them knowing I'm around."

"OK, gorgeous." Fury winked at Randy. "We'll give you ten minutes before we take off. And we'll be back after you when Storms blasts off."

"Good!" Wendy smiled and started around the ship.

"What gives?" Randy asked under his breath.

"We'll just hop over to the other side of the dome. This'll work out perfect. They'll think we're gone. She won't suspect it was us when Pratt and Storms and the rest start to change." Wendy rounded the ship. Fury became all business. "Have the boys ready things for takeoff. This's got to look good."

"I'M AFRAID you were a trifle too harsh with Miss North, sir."

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Wuster's voice contained a note of reproach.

Pratt didn't seem to hear him. His eyes were fixed on the dwindling trail of the other ship's rockets. When it had vanished far up, he lowered his head. "Well, that's one nuisance out of our hair." But his voice didn't express relief.

"I agree, sir," Wuster said with sly sadistic notes of pleasure. "Now we can study this phenomenon of Flat Skull, happy in our uninterrupted privacy. Miss North was taking up too much of our time. And after all, children are for those who have no other interests in life. For us, the *Epithymosis Syntesis* and kindred things that will find their place in the next edition of the Encyclopedia Geographica."

"What were you going to say was the nature of the invisible barrier?" Captain Storms was making a valiant effort to recapture his equanimity.

"Oh, yes." Pratt frowned. "What I was going to say was that it exhibits some of the ideal properties of translation from three-space to N-dimension, in that you accelerate rapidly until your velocity is almost the speed of light. Then, if you don't cut your acceleration down to almost zero, you strike light velocity like it was a solid wall and your acceleration drops instantly to zero or almost zero. From there, you creep upward in speed to just slightly above light speed, and suddenly you're in N-dimension. And from there you can decelerate to slow speeds."

"But how is the barrier like that?" Storms looked at Pratt, puzzled.

"It isn't material. Matter. When your bullet hit it, it stopped and hung there for an instant longer than it would have against a steel plate, for example, as though it had penetrated a few millionths of an inch into the barrier and had to come free."

"What are you driving at?"

"Let's go to the barrier and I'll show you." Pratt didn't wait for agreement. He started toward the invisible wall a few hundred yards distant.

The others followed, and Wendy from her vantage point atop a small knoll followed them with binoculars.

Paul Pratt approached the invisible wall with caution, feeling for it as a blind man might feel for a door. His hand encountered invisible solidity.

"Here we are." He slapped it lightly to prove its solidness. Then, quite calmly, he placed his palm flat against it and leaned his weight.

There was a gasp of surprise from those watching. As slow as the movement of an hour hand on the face of a clock, his hand moved forward into the barrier. After it had penetrated a definite and indisputable distance he withdrew it, as slowly. When he was free, he stepped back, a satisfied look on his face.

"See? I was right. It's a space-induction field—or rather a contra-space barrier. Lombardo pointed out that the trans-dimensional Einsteinian equation could hold for at least fourteen other values of the invariant than the one for light speed."

Storms was excited now. "Then what we see beyond the barrier is in another dimension?"

"I—I don't think so." Pratt seemed uncertain of himself. "I think it's just a continuation of Lern, and still in N-dimension. We're going to have to be very cautious though. You know that some of the physical laws in N-dimension are slightly different than they are in three-dimension. We can't tell ahead of time what things will be like in there. And don't forget what Brian McCarthy said about metal."

"We're not likely to." Storms became grave. "Nor how it affected his

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mind."

Pratt leaned his hand against the barrier again and pushed. "I'm going to see how thick the wall is." Everyone watched as his hand moved forward with infinite slowness. "We know now why those wrecked ships are on the Mesa instead of still hung up above it. They sank down slowly just as my hand is penetrating here. Or at least they sank down slowly until they had penetrated the barrier, then dropped the rest of the way."

Suddenly he could wiggle his fingers. "I'm through!" he said triumphantly. "The barrier's about six inches through. I'm going to pull out. We want to take some instruments with us that can detect possible changes inside the dome. Nothing foolhardy. If we can get at the root of this thing, we'll have the greatest discovery in science of the past three centuries!"

WENDY'S BINOCULARS were fixed on Paul Pratt's hand as it penetrated the barrier. The pantomine of his fingers told her the whole story. "So it's as simple as that to get through!" she murmured.

And when the group started back toward the Astra, she guessed correctly that they were going to get instruments and do things the cautious way.

She slid down from her vantage point and, making sure to keep out of sight, went toward the barrier, holding an arm ahead of her to keep from denting her shapely nose against it unexpectedly.

There was a moment of intense panic when her nostrils and mouth were within the barrier wall and she couldn't breathe. But she was game, and resolutely pushed through, standing at last inside the invisible wall, and free of it.

She stood silent for a long minute, analyzing the smells and sounds and colors. Except for a faint odor that tugged uncomfortably at some hidden memory, there was nothing different than outside the barrier.

On the other side where she had been, a gust of wind picked up a swirl of dust and flung it impotently against the invisible wall. The visual evidence of a breeze made her conscious of the fact that here not a breath of air stirred. Enough must seep through to keep it fresh, she decided. But now something else crept into consciousness. It was slightly warmer here. Almost as though... The memory of a vacation in the country back on Earth, of a barn, of the warmth inside with the horses and cows...

The smell wasn't the same. It was more of— Her mind shied away from the thought, then faced it. Of death. Of something dead. That's what the smell was, though very faint

She looked across the short distance to the cliffs of Flat Skull Mesa and recalled all those wrecked spaceships. That's where the odor of death came from, of course.

She half turned as though to go back the way she had come. Then, tossing her head, she went forward, every sense alert for the slightest movement.

"I'll get the answers before Mr. Paul Pratt, or know the reason why," she promised herself.

She circled to the left to keep out of sight of the Astra. When she was far enough around the base of the mesa, she discarded caution and began to look for a path that would take her up the side of the cliff.

There were definite foot paths here, crisscrossing. The normally loose surface sand was packed as though by the passage of many feet over long periods of time. It couldn't be that, she decided, but that's the way it looked. They led in no particular direction.

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Suddenly, the smell of death pushed into her nostrils as a gust of air brushed against her. Before she could move, it had gone. She stood trembling with the horror of it, and slowly she doubted it had happened. It had been a trick of her imagination, she decided. There had been nothing to make a gust of air like that. It had been as though something invisible had passed near her and breathed against her. But that was impossible.

Then she forgot about it completely. Ahead of her was a wide trail that sloped up the side of the cliff, and part way up the trail a dark blot indicated an opening into some sort of cave or tunnel.

With an exclamation of triumph she hurried toward it. She reached the base of the trail and turned to look back toward the Astra. A quarter of a mile away on the outside of the barrier were Paul and Captain Storms and the others waving at her violently.

She chuckled triumphantly and waved to them, then disdainfully turned her back and started up the trail.

From somewhere ahead of her and seemingly far away came a loud *ssslupff* as of someone pulling a foot loose from sticky mud with the sound magnified a thousand times.

In the silence that followed, from high up on the cliff, a mad sound of cackling laughter drifted down. Wendy jerked fear-widened eyes upward. The laughter broke off abruptly.

Was that a bearded, hollow-eyed face peering down at her? She stared at it, trying to be sure; but it vanished. And once again the mad cackling laughter floated down with a schizophrenic note of infinite sadness and despair lurking in its undertones.

Terror nipped painfully at her heart. She turned to run. The smell of death pushed into her nostrils again like a physical blow, and the breath of invisible movements surrounded her.

Far away—too far away—she saw Paul straining forward, yet as immobile as a statue, his eyes staring toward her in an anguish of helplessness. Then blackness settled over her. But just before it descended, there were trees and ferns and profuse vegetation, and fat writhing things that were floating purposefully toward her.

PAUL PRATT was partly through the barrier when suddenly the barren view of the tableland lifted above the flat landscape changed. He saw Wendy turn as though to run toward him, then sway and start to fall. And abruptly, swaying tropical fronds appeared in thick profusion, hiding her from view.

At the same time, the bulk of Flat Skull Mesa changed to become a giant futuristic building-city whose roof cradled slim-nosed spaceships ready for takeoff. For a dreadful moment, he knew things had changed. Then it seemed that it had always been that way.

This is home, and I'm so homesick...

It was his own thought. He'd been away such a long time. And now, if he hurried, he would soon be home in the glistening halls of his birth. All his friends were there, happy....

But no, some of them were with him, crowding behind him, pushing him forward in their eagerness to get home before he did. He turned to call to them. Their bodies were long and strong and covered with sleek fur. Their red-tongued white-fanged mouths were open, dripping hungrily with saliva. They were his kind.

But why were they crouching, ready to spring on him as though he were prey to be attacked and eaten? The

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reason came to him. It was natural. It was the Law. His kind ate and was eaten. That was why their civilization was the greatest in all universes. He should be singling out one of them for attack. He was hungry.

First, though, he would have to pretend to flee, getting them to pursue him, drawing ahead of them until only one was close, then he could turn suddenly and attack without himself being overwhelmed and eaten.

With a snarl, he sprang into the jungle, running silently on cushioned, claw sheathed pads, knowing that though he left no footprints they would follow his spore.

About him was the silence of the jungle, the smell of hot earth and the heady hunger-inspiring stench of decaying flesh. And here, suddenly, was a path. A game trail.

He took it, gliding forward in a half crouch, ears pricked forward for the slightest sound. Behind him, he knew his companions were following his spore.

The death smell pushed into his nostrils. A breath of movement ruffled his fur. His whiskers trembled with the pleasure of it. This was home, and he had always been here, following the trails in search of prey, eating his kind, and knowing in some way that his destiny was to be eaten in turn. For that was the Law.

He came to an abrupt stop, tail twitching nervously. Ahead, apparently asleep, lay a sleek creature of his own kind. It would be an easy victim. He crept forward cautiously so as not to waken it. Its smell came stronger, sweet and tantalizing. In his mind's eye, he envisioned dripping red meat that would sate his growing hunger, give him strength to hunt down those who were stalking invisibly toward him from behind.

He was over the sleeping creature, reaching out to bring raking claws across the smooth throat and tear away the flesh to expose torn arteries spurting with life's blood.

From the depths of buried consciousness, something held him back, incapable of movement. His claws in some unsensed way had become fragile twigs, his body an unmoving shape of treelike growth. And his sleeping victim changed apace. A tree whose form stirred something within him, and lurking within it a face that fought at blocked memory, struggling almost to the surface of thought.

Something struck against him, sending him rolling backwards, while the universe rocked around him. There was a fleeting glimpse of shadowy, snakelike shapes writhing angrily in the air above him. And when he shook his head to clear his eyes he saw Joe Fury standing astride the unconscious form of Wendy, a gloating sneer on his face.

"Keep back, Pratt," Fury warned.

Paul lay where he had fallen, breathing violently, what he had just been through still strong in his memory. He knew now what had happened. Here on this strange planet of Lern in N-Dimension was a living creature of gigantic proportions, or perhaps it was a nest of them. There had been that momentary glimpse of writhing things that vanished.

Fury had something that could drive the delusions set up by the invisible creatures back and enable him to enter their dome nest safely. He had come in to get Wendy and drag her to safety, and then leave the others there, to eat and be eaten as the crew of the Condor had been, with Brian McCarthy the final survivor.

PAUL SAT up and glanced around. Three hundred yards away Captain Storms, Jerry Wuster, and four of the crew of the Astra were stalking one another grotesquely. So the range

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of whatever Fury had was limited.

He turned back to Fury. The man was trying to lift Wendy to his shoulder while still keeping his gun free in one hand.

"Why don't you shoot me?" he asked.

Fury grinned. "That'd make my friends mad. They like to use you in their games."

He had Wendy half draped on one shoulder. He started to straighten. It was the moment Paul had hoped for. He half rose and leaped feet first, with a scissors movement of his legs. Fury let Wendy roll off his shoulder as he tried to bring his gun up. He fired too late. Pratt's scissoring legs caught him below the knees and tripped him forward. The shot went wild. While he was trying to role over and bring the gun up again, Pratt seized his wrist in both hands and with a full arm movement twisted the wrist completely around.

Fury rose from the ground and flipped over, the gun dropping from nerveless fingers. Immediately, Pratt sat down with one foot against Fury's neck and the other against his armpit, the arm still gripped by the wrist and cruelly bent around. Fury's face, half buried in the dirt, glistened with sweat from the intense pain. His free hand was moving up slowly toward his belt.

Pratt sensed that he was moving to shut off the device that protected them. "No you don't," he gritted, jerking the arm he held. Fury jerked with the pain. His crawling hand stopped. Pratt looked around for the gun. It was just out of reach.

He stretched Fury's arm again. Fury closed his eyes from the pain. Pratt took advantage of a fact well known to wrestlers. He let go of Fury's arm, knowing that it would be two or three seconds before the man would realize the painful tension was gone.

He got the gun. "All right, Fury. Get up."

Fury turned his head, realization of what had happened coming into his blinking eyes. He rolled over on his back and worked his arm. "So you think you've got the upper hand," he said, half to himself.

"I get the setup now." Pratt's voice was cold with rage. "You have a device in your ship that will blank out the hypnotic effect of whatever type of creature there is in here. You knew about them ahead of time. We'll get to the root of that later. But right now, as soon as you can use your arm you're going to take off that portable unit, whatever it is, and hand it over to me."

"That's what you think. If I shut it off, you'll instantly be like you were. I won't. I know how to keep from being that way."

A shot rang out. The gun in Pratt's hand kicked back. Fury dropped to one knee, the calf of the leg torn open by the bullet. Pratt's voice was cold: "I'm not fooling around. I know what you've got coming and I'd like to give you some of it right now."

Fury stared at him for a moment, then carefully lifted a hand toward his chest. "I'll have to take off my jacket to get at it."

"Stop!" Pratt said. Fury's hand paused. "I don't trust you. Stand up. You can, even if it's painful. And I don't think you'd stand much of a chance against me now with a bad leg and strained tendons on your right arm, if you did manage to shut off your immunizing field and change me back in my mind to a wild animal."

He grinned as Fury's face paled noticeably. The man obviously hadn't thought of that.

"What do you want me to do?"

Pratt glanced quickly in the direction of the other men. The brief glance told him they were still far enough separated so that there was

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little danger of any two of them meeting and attacking each other under the beliefs he himself had been under a few short minutes ago.

He turned back quickly before Fury could move. "Keep your hands at you sides while I see if I can waken Miss North."

He took a step toward her. With his eyes on Fury, he knelt down and shook her shoulder gently. She didn't move. He shook her more violently. When she still didn't move, he straightened up. "She's out for some time yet. We'll walk toward Captain Storms until the range of your nullifier touches him."

TEN MINUTES later, Storms had sufficiently gained his mental balance to be himself again, though still shaking his head in wonder over how he had been thinking a few minutes before. "Now I know why the crew of the Condor turned cannibal!" he said. "I was ready to eat you if I could find you, Paul."

"Never mind that," Pratt said sharply. "Get your mind to working. We've got to get to Wuster and the others, and then..." His voice trailed off as he caught sight of Wendy. She was up and walking in the half crouch that the others were using. He debated a minute. "We'll go to Wuster next. Storms, pin Fury's arms behind him and help him walk. It'll hurry things a bit."

Wuster turned in the direction of the sweet odor of flesh with quivering eagerness. He was incredibly hungry. For hours he had been tracking his prey without catching up with it. The thought of warm quivering meat with blood still flowing in sluggish spurts was almost too much. He swayed weakly from the ecstacy of desire. The scent became suddenly very strong. There was movement just beyond the thick green leaves ahead. He sank to his belly ready to spring—and blinked his eyes in stupefaction as the vegetation vanished. He realized with a sudden surge of self-consciousness that he was on his hands and knees. There was still the feeling of a long graceful tail stretched out behind him, twitching to get the right balance for a springing leap. He turned to get visual confirmation of it. His quite human posterior sent the last fleeting delusion skittering.

Utterly shamefaced, he rose to his feet. "I really don't know what came over me, sir." He looked at Pratt penetratingly, trying to divine how much the others could guess of the utterly mad mirage from which he had just emerged.

"Skip that and follow us." There was no smile on Pratt's face. And shortly, Wuster was noticing the bleeding wound on the calf of Fury's leg and the way the crew members of the Astra were acting, and putting two and two together.

It took time. It was a full half hour before Pratt, with the still bewildered crew members, and Storms and Wuster approached Wendy North close enough for the field to affect her.

When she snapped out of it, she shuddered uncontrollably for a moment, then bit her lip and gained a little control.

Pratt watched her until he was sure she would be all right. "Wuster, take care of her," he said. "All of you be sure you stay close until we get to the ship." He looked sharply at Wendy. "If we get that far, Miss North, do you have any idea where Fury's ship is?"

She shook her head.

Pratt grunted. "It's probably on the other side of Flat Skull. Fury planned to let us fall victim to these other-dimensional things."

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Wendy shook her head. "I can't believe it. Why? What would he have to gain?"

IT WAS several hours later before she saw. In the interim, Captain Storms and his crew had unlocked a few secret compartments of the Astra and given away the fact that the ship was armed with the most modern of space fighting tools. A target seeking bomb had been sent over the invisible dome to attach itself to Fury's ship. It could be detonated by radio. Randy and the rest of Fury's crew had surrendered and agreed to follow the Astra back to Mars.

Both ships were high above the planet Lern when Pratt ordered Randy in the other ship to shut off the protective field again. And below, suddenly, was the futuristic city once more. Flat Skull Mesa was transformed into a giant spaceport with several sleek ships resting there, ready to depart.

Pratt grinned mirthlessly at Wendy's amazed expression. "You should guess the whole thing now," he said. "Down there is a form of life, I think. In some ways, it's like the *Epithymosis Syntesis* I was trying to catch when I first met you. And by the way, I think Fury's nullifying field will be useful in catching that elusive fish. Those creatures down there entice their prey—metallic spaceships—by the illusion you're looking at. Once they get inside the barrier . . ."

Wendy shuddered at the memory. Her voice was very meek. "I—I wish I had known. I fainted, and when I came to, you and Fury were fighting. I didn't know what it was about and was afraid you would make me get out of the excitement, so I pretended—"

Pratt interrupted her: "I know. It's easy to tell if a person's faking. The movements of their eyelids give it away every time."

"You knew?"

"You're a reporter, aren't you?" Pratt said. "How could you ever know what the rest of us went through if you didn't experience it? And now you know how McCarthy and the countless others felt—a little. You could never really know unless you had found—Wuster here, maybe—and eaten him. But to get off that subject, Fury and his crew were worse than space pirates. They were ghouls. Periodically, they called here and went through any new wrecks and took everything of value. This was their lobster trap. I don't know how they stumbled onto it. Probably piloted some scientist who fathomed the nature of the thing and devised the field to counteract the hypnotically induced illusions and delusions. We'll know soon enough. Meanwhile, we're rushing back to Mars and get the Solar Government on this. And I'm going fishing again." He grinned at Wendy. "Want to come along?"

But before she could answer, he had taken her in his arms, and as their lips met, he forgot all about his fishing plans.

Coming in the September FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

"THE TERRIBLE PUPPETS"

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Behind every great man's success lies a secret—one you will never believe, unless you too have tasted the fruits of fame. Here is the intriguing behind-the-scenes story! Don't miss it!

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HOW HIGH IS UP?

By
Salem Lane

THE LIMIT of man's ascension into the stratosphere was marked more than 15 years ago, and nobody has attempted to reach or surpass that great altitude since. On November 11, 1935, under the auspices of the National Geographic Society and the U.S. Air Corps, Majors Stevens and Anderson piloted their huge balloon—*the Explorer* II—72,395 feet above South Dakota.

Many interesting things were revealed on that eventful trip. For example, the sky was only about five percent as bright as it seems normally, and the sun is 20 per cent brighter, shining amongst stars which are clearly visible. The explorers reported that the sky above them was almost black, growing paler toward the horizon. They said the reflection from the sunlit earth was exceptionally brilliant, and that the ropes of the balloon seemed to glow like gaseous tubes at night.

The reading on the thermometer outside the balloon was 80 degrees below zero, yet the blistering rays of the dazzling sun were 20 per cent hotter than any tropical noonday sun at sea level. The normal barometric pressure is 30 inches, but at this record height it registered only 2.7 inches, which indicated that more than 90 per cent of the atmosphere lies below 14 miles.

GUILTY, YOUR HONOR

By
Jon Barry

IN MARCH of 1950, a group of archeologists from the Universities of Chicago and Pennsylvania, reported that they had unearthed a small tablet which describes the very first record of a murder trial. This dates back nearly 4,000 years, and tells how three men killed another man and then informed his wife, who failed to notify the proper authorities, thus becoming an accessory to the crime.

The case became known, however, and was brought before King Ur-Ninurta, who turned it over for trial to the citizens' committee of Nippur. In this assembly, nine men started to prosecute the three murderers as well as the wife of the murdered man. After much argument, two men spoke in the wife's defense, saying that she had had nothing to do with the crime. They argued that since her husband did not support her, she had a right to remain silent about his murder. The result was that the woman was set free, the three murderers executed.

This tale of antiquity, which took place in 1850 B.C., was written on a two-by-four-inch clay tablet found in Iraq about 100 miles south of Bagdad. The story was written in cuneiform script in the Sumerian language, and was translated by Dr. Samuel Noah Kramer and Dr. Thorkild Jacobsen. It is the oldest known record of a murder trial, and it is interesting to note that it reveals that in those early times they used the same basic law that we use today.

. . . AND THE GLORY

By
June Lurie

OUR predecessors were great. No one can deny that—not even the Great Minds. Nor do they attempt to. Everywhere around us we see the evidence of their greatness, the vast cities now falling into ruin, the huge roadways and the vast numbers of machines. It is, indeed, awe-inspiring to realize what gigantic accomplishments They made. They controlled the heavens and the Earth. All living things were subservient to Them. We were as nothing before Their might and but for Their failure we would still be nothing.

We have not yet worked out the reasons for Their failure. For some reason unknown to us, they warred among themselves to extinction. They polluted this Earth with Their weapons, the power of which we can only guess. Why they fought among themselves we do not know for Their technology provided Them with everything They needed.

The Great Minds have spent much time trying to deduce the causes of Their catastrophe, but there seems to be no valid reason, none at least which our brains are capable of understanding.

But why deplore Their going? After all that is what permitted us to attain our eminence, to inherit this planet. We need not be ashamed that They were more powerful and that it is only by Their self-destruction that we were able to gain our present peak as rulers of this planet. Still, we pity them.

Oh, I am proud to be an ant!

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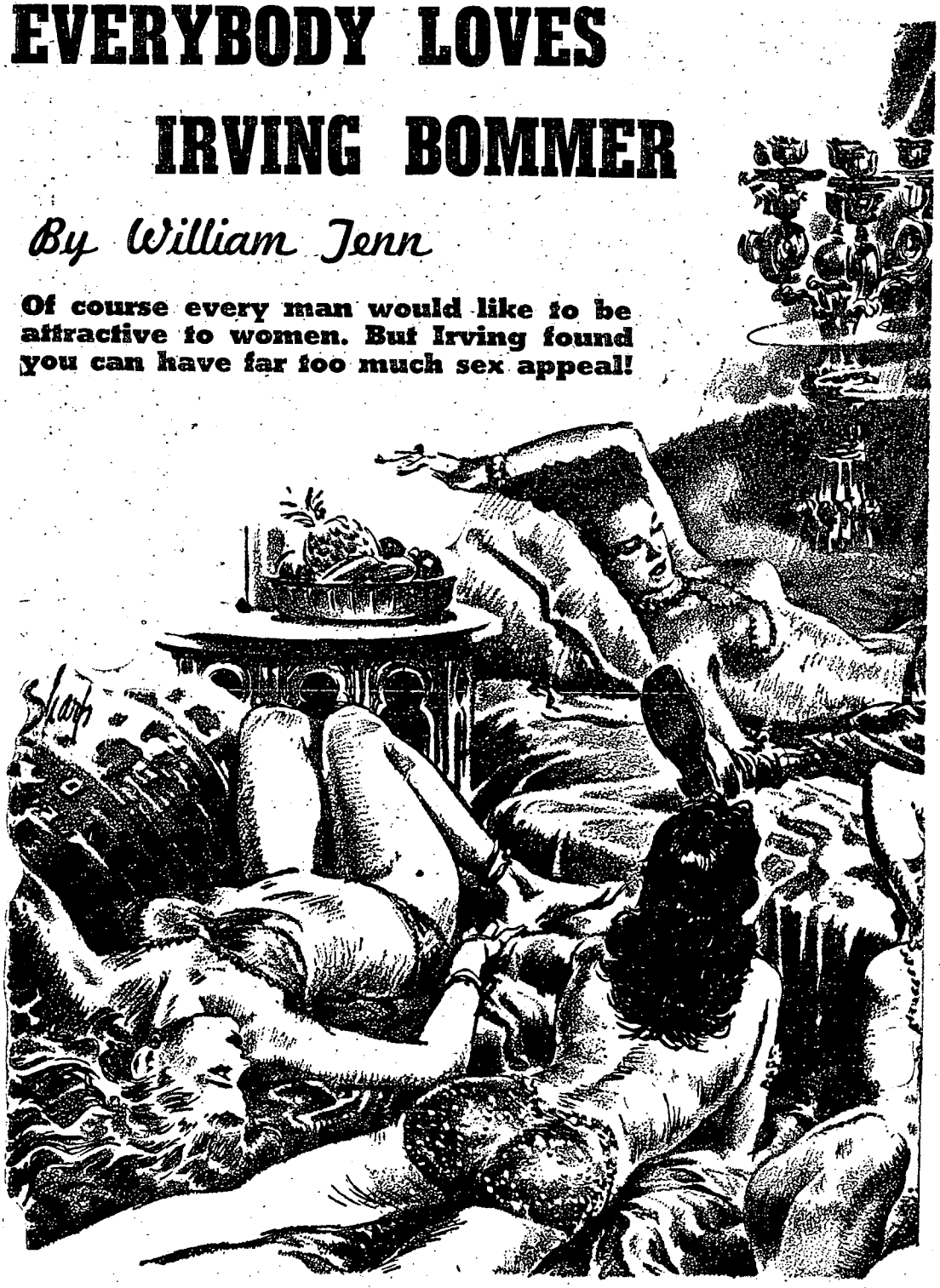
EVERYBODY LOVES IRVING BOMMER

By William Jenn

Of course every man would like to be attractive to women. But Irving found you can have far too much sex appeal!



He would dream blissfully of beautiful women waiting adoringly on his needs

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IRVING BOMMER had been following a girl in a green frock simply because (a) she seemed to be going in his general direction, (b) she did interesting geometry with her frock as she walked and (c) he was behind her so that she couldn't possibly see his face, when the absolutely fantastic thing happened to him.

A compliment.

The gypsy woman, who sat on and overflowed the stone step in front of her soiled little shop, leaned for-

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ward and called: "'Ey, Mistair!" Then, as he broke his plodding stride to consider her and the window full of dream-books and numerology texts, she cleared her throat with the sound of lumpy oatmeal being stirred.

"'Ey, Mistair! You, the 'ansome wan!"

Irving rocked on one foot, came to a dead stop and watched the girl maneuver the green frock around the corner and out of his life.

For the moment, he was paralyzed. He could not leave the neighborhood of that delectable compliment even—even if Humphries himself, the housewares buyer of Gregworth's, had materialized from behind an invisible counter and snapped his fingers.

But then, of course, some people thought it was funny. Some people, especially women... His pale cheeks slowly ripened as he cudgeled his slow brain to find a retort both clever and devastating. "A-a-ah!" he began extemporaneously.

"Come 'ere, 'ansome mistair," she commanded, with no trace of mockery. "Inside, you gat what you wan' so badly. I 'ave it."

What he wanted badly? How did she know? Even he, Irving Bommer, had only the vaguest conception. Yet, he found himself following her wide, swinging body through the doorway into a store drearily furnished with three folding chairs and a bridge table on which rested a cracked crystal ball. Five children of astonishingly overlapping ages played in front of a torn bedsheet which curtained off the back room. At a peremptory bawl from the woman, they tumbled out of sight through the sheet.

As he settled into a folding chair that immediately leaned into a forty-five degree angle with the floor, Irving Bommer wondered hazily what he was doing there. He remembered that Mrs. Nagenbeck had told him when he first rented a room from her: "Never keep *no* supper for *no* border at *no* time" and, since today had been monthly inventory in the housewares department, he was both late and hungry. Still...

You never knew what these gypsies might come up with. They were certainly a discerning bunch. They had standards of beauty that weren't poured out of the Hollywood mold; they came of a race that had been cosmopolitan since Pilate; they could recognize things like nobility of soul and—well, perhaps even handsomeness—worldly, mature handsomeness, you could call it.

"Well, uh," he essayed a chuckle. "What do you have that I—that I—uh—want so badly? A dream-book to clean up on the races? Never play the races. And I never have my fortune told, either."

She stood before him in multifidious flesh and multitudinous colorful clothing, examining him gravely out of tiny, tired black eyes. "No," she said at last. "For you no fortune I tal. I geeve this."

THERE WAS a medicine bottle in her outstretched hand, a bottle filled with a bubbly purple liquid which changed to a rich red and then a somber blue under the shadow-thick twilight pressing in from the shop window.

"What—what is it?" he asked, though he knew suddenly there was but one thing he could be offered.

"Belong my 'osban. He 'ave this, he die. Bot you, ees deeferen. You entitle. Eet geeve you woman."

Irving Bommer started at the insult. He tried to laugh, but gasped his belief, his desire, instead. Woman!

"You mean it's a potion—a love philter?" His voice cracked between the conflict of ridicule and acceptance.

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"Pheeltair. Wan I see you, I know you need. You 'ave moch onhoppiness. Vairy leetle hoppy. Bot rembair, use only to take bock what 'as been taken. Your blood on drop from pheeltair makes drop from pheeltair yours. Wan drop at time. Ten dollars, please."

That did it. Ten dollars! For some colored water she'd mixed up in the back room. Just because he'd been gullible enough to walk inside. Not for Irving Bommer. He was nobody's fool.

"I'm nobody's fool," he told her, finding the thought good enough to articulate. He stood up and shook himself.

"Leesen!" The gypsy woman's voice was hoarse and commanding. "You being fool now. You need. I could osk feefty, I could osk a tousand. I osk ten because thot is price, because you 'ave ten, because you need. And I—I don' need now. Don' be fool. Take eet. You be—you be really 'ansome."

Irving found the sneer wouldn't stay put, that the door was too far away. Very slowly, he counted out ten dollars, leaving himself only two until pay day. Even the recollection of the fantastically expensive bottle of aftershave lotion he had been persuaded to purchase last week didn't inhibit him. He—just had to...

"Wan drop of blood wan you use," the woman called after him as he hurried out of the shop. "Use only to—good lock, mistair."

By the time he had walked the two long blocks to his boarding house, the wildly hopeful elation had subsided into the usual abiding humiliation.

"What a sucker, what a sucker!" he raged as he slipped into the back entrance of Mrs. Nagenbeck's boarding house and climbed the stairs. Irving Bommer, the Olympic champ of suckers! Show him anything and he bought it. Love philters!

But when he had slammed the door of his thin little room behind him, when he had tossed the small bottle viciously to the bed, he bit his lips and drooled two huge tears out of his near-sighted eyes.

"If only I had a face instead of a comic drawing," he bawled. "If only I had a body, instead of a—instead of what I have, dammit!"

Then his mind, being relatively sane, refused to deal any longer in these terms. Let us daydream, said his mind to his reeling subconscious; let us daydream and imagine how pleasant it could be.

SO HE SAT on the bed, his chin nursing blissfully on one drawn-up knee, and dreamed of a correctly created world where women schemed for his attentions and fought for his person; where, unable to win him privately, they shared him willy-nilly with equally determined sisters. Through this glorious place, he wandered familiarly, pleased as always by the way the rules kept changing in his favor.

Sometimes he was the only male left alive after an atomic catastrophe; and sometimes he reclined on purple cushions, puffing on his hookah while a harem full of breath-taking houri waited adoringly; and yet, other times, dozens of men—all their faces curiously reminiscent of Humphries, the housewares buyer—watched in stolid despair as Bommer the rich, Bommer the successful, Bommer the incredible, he escorted their wives, fiancees and special girl friends out of rather roomy limousines into a bachelor's apartment so multiplex as to occupy the whole of a Park Avenue building.

Now and then, there might be a sequence—a painless one!—with a

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plastic surgeon, which talented gentleman, having committed his masterpiece, would die of satisfaction before he could mar his work by duplicating it. Frequently, Irving Bommer would postpone the difficult choice between a statuesque, glowing blonde and a pert little redhead long enough to ponder upon such events as his having grown past six feet two inches with no noticeable tremors, as his shoulders having broadened, his feet unflattened, his nose diminished and straightened. While he enjoyed the new resonance of his voice and the catchy heartiness of his laughter, while he was proud of his perfect, ever-poised wit and his exact, all-purpose education, it was to his splendid physical attributes that he found himself continually returning. That head of hair which spilled carelessly over his bald spot, that third set of teeth miraculously growing past the ruins of yellowed enamel and cheap bridgework, that stomach, no longer catching the eye through a bubbly paunch, but decently hidden behind a wall of muscle. That stomach! In it were now to be found only the finest vintage wines, the tastiest dishes prepared by the most expert chefs, the most succulent, the most delicious....

With an abrupt gulp, Irving Bommer swallowed the saliva which had collected in his mouth and realized he was violently hungry.

ACCORDING to his watch, the kitchen would be dark and empty: it was accessible by way of the back staircase which passed his room in its creaking descent.

Mrs. Nagenbeck, however, when aroused by an unauthorized raid on her larder, tended to combine the most significant characteristics of each of the Three Furies in one harmonious whole. Why, Irving Bommer quivered, if she caught him sneaking—

"Well, that's a chance we'll just have to take," his stomach interposed harshly.

Sighing with trepidation, he went noisily downstairs on the top-most tips of his toes.

Feeling around in the darkness, he touched the refrigerator padlock. He frowned hungrily. A careful search and some emphatic shin-barking, however, netted him three-fourths of a salami, half a loaf of rye bread and a heavy triangular-bladed knife of the type which is indispensable when boarding a Spanish galleon from a British privateer.

"Oke," said his stomach, licking its duodenum. "Let's start!"

A light clicked on in the room behind the kitchen. Irving stopped in mid-slice, his body absolutely still, but his heart and still-talkative stomach somersaulting against each other like a pair of acrobats in a rousing vaudeville finale. As whenever he was frightened, he began to perspire so profusely that his feet slid around in their tight shoes

"Who's there?" Mrs. Nagenbeck called. "Anyone in the kitchen?"

Declining to answer her, even in the negative, Irving Bommer fled upstairs damply, with his food, knife and now thoroughly confused internal anatomy.

Back in his room, fingers on the light-switch, he gasped for a moment, listened for a moment, then smiled. He had left no traces.

He sauntered leisurely to the bed, eating a slice of salami off the knife with wonderfully unselfconscious courage. The purple medicine lay where he had hurled it. It looked red; it also looked slightly blue; then again, sometimes...

He sat down and started to unscrew the bottle cap with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand and slowly raised two sloppy eyebrows at

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the difficulty. So, he thought, we shift the knife to the right hand, sort of holding the blade under our armpit, get a good grip on the bottle with our left hand, and strenuously twist the cap. Meanwhile, we continue to munch. Under out armpit, the knife blade squirms anxiously, trying to get a good sight on a valuable organ.

The cap was stuck fast. Maybe you weren't supposed to open it. Maybe you smashed the bottle and used it all at once. He could worry about it later, in any case. At the moment, he had salami, he had rye bread. And two dollars instead of twelve.

He started to put the bottle down, giving it an irritated half-twist back and forth to show that he wasn't through with it. The cap loosened. Bommer unscrewed it all the way, more than a little startled. He'd never known they made medicine bottles with left-hand threads.

ODD SMELL. Like—like a soaped, scrubbed and freshly-diapered infant who had abruptly decided that a full bladder was not half so pleasant as an empty one; and the liquid in the bottle was blue. He smelled again. No, more like a very hairy man who'd spent a busy afternoon with pick and shovel and couldn't see any sense in taking a bath today and smashing one of his most cherished personal traditions. Yet as Irving Bommer meditated at the glass vial now, it shone with a flashing scarlet. As he brought it under his nose for one last sniff, he marveled at how he had misjudged the odor: unpleasant it was, very much so, but you could identify it easily. It was...not exactly stale tobacco smoke...no, nor a recently manured field—

He spilled a little on his left palm. Purple.

A fist clump-clump-clumped on his door. "Hey, there!" Mrs. Nagenbeck yelled. "You, Mr. Bommer! Open this door! I know what you got in there. You got my food in there. Open that door!"

At Irving Bommer's convulsion, the knife under his armpit made a wild leap for freedom and glory. It aimed at a wrist where, with any luck, the whole left hand might be severed (and wouldn't that accomplishment put a certain haughty meat-cleaver in its place!). Unfortunately, the hand had jerked down instinctively to shove the salami and rye bread under the pillow. The knife clattered to the floor, content—but not happy—with a tip of the fourth finger and a sliver of pinky.

"If you don't open this door right now, this instant, this second," Mrs. Nagenbeck announced through the keyhole which she had pressed into service as a megaphone, "I will kick it down, I will break it down." Having achieved Ossa, she cast about for Pelion. "I will smash it and charge you for a door, two hinges and whatever woodwork is damaged. Not to mention the food you got in there and you're making unhygienic by touching. Open the door you Mr. Bommer!"

He shoved the knife under the pillow after the food and jerked a blanket over them all. Then, recapping the medicine bottle, he walked toward the door sucking his bleeding fingers and perspiring insanely.

"Juzza second," he begged, the words clotting in his mouth.

"Then there's the lock," Mrs. Nagenbeck brooded. "A good lock today costs four, five, six dollars. And where's the labor costs I pay to the carpenter for his work in putting it on? If I have to break this door, if I have to crash my own..."

HER VOICE died into a curious mumble. Irving Bommer heard two sounds like the anticipatory

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wheezes of a locomotive before he managed to unlock the door.

Mrs. Nagenbeck stood there in her lavender dressing gown, her brows knit and her papery nostrils flared.

The salami! With her boarding-house experience, she could probably track it to the correct corner of the pillow by aroma alone.

"What a funny..." Mrs. Nagenbeck began uncertainly, hostile lines leaving her face with much regret. "What a strange smell! Such an unusual odor—so peculiar, so—Oh, you poor boy, Mr. Bommer—you hurt?"

He shook his head, bewildered by the completely alien expression on her face. It wasn't anger, yet it certainly looked dangerous. He retreated into the room. Mrs. Nagenbeck followed him, her voice experimenting with various sounds and winding up with something mighty like a coo.

"Let me see the hurt fingers, the ripped part, the scratch, the bruise." she said shyly, pulling his left hand from his mouth with sufficient force to loosen five teeth. "Oo-ooh, does it hurt? You got iodine antiseptic or mercurochrome peroxide antiseptic? And a styptic pencil antiseptic? And gauze bandages for wrapping and dressing?"

Overcome by her startling shift of mood, Irving Bommer indicated the medicine chest with his nose.

She continued to make the strange, embarrassing noises as she dressed the wound, for all the world like a saber-tooth purring. Every once in a while, when her lifted eyes met Irving Bommer's, she smiled with a quick exhalation. But when, holding his hand up for a last inspection, she suddenly planted a lingering, groaning kiss in the palm, he became frightened.

He strode to the door, pulling Mrs. Nagenbeck by the precious hand. "Thanks a lot," he told her. "But it's late. I have to be getting to bed."

Mrs. Nagenbeck let go. "You want me to leave," she stated reproachfully.

At his nod, she swallowed, smiled bravely and walked out sideways, practically scraping the buttons off his vest.

"Don't work too hard," her sad face was saying as he closed the door upon it. "Someone like you shouldn't have to kill themselves to death working at a job. Goodnight, Mr. Bommer."

THE LUSH purple of the little vial winked at him from the bed. The love potion! He had spilled a drop in his palm and, after his fingers were cut, had involuntarily clenched his hand. The gypsy woman had said that a drop of his blood mixed with a drop of the potion would make that drop his very own. Evidently that had happened; Mrs. Nagenbeck was aflame. He shuddered. Mrs. Nagenbeck. What kind of a love philter—

But what was sauce for Mrs. Nagenbeck undoubtedly would be sauce for other, younger, more desirable females. Like that lazy-eyed girl behind the cutlery counter, or the sparkling minx in salad bowls and baking dishes.

A knock on the door.

"It's only me, Hilda Nagenbeck. Look, Mr. Bommer, I got to thinking, salami and rye bread are pretty dry. Besides, they make you thirsty for something to drink. So I brought up two cans of beer."

He smiled as he opened the door and took the two cans. Time had not stood still with Mrs. Nagenbeck. What had been a-budding in her eyes before was now in glorious bloom. Her soul stood on her lashes and waved at him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Nagenbeck. Now, go right to bed. Go ahead."

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She nodded quickly, obediently, and plumped down the passage, casting a yearning glance backwards with every step.

It was with straighter, prouder shoulders that Irving Bommer applied the requisite opening pressure to a can of beer. Mrs. Nagenbeck was not much, certainly; but she pointed the way to a more interesting future.

He was handsome now—to any woman with a mildly sensitive nose.

Only trouble, there was so little of the stuff; the bottle was terribly small. Who knew how long the effect lasted? And he had so much to catch up with.

As he finished the second can of beer, much, much pleased with himself, he suddenly hit on the solution. Beautiful! And so simple.

First, he poured the contents of the medicine bottle into the empty can. Then, stripping off the bandages, he inserted his two injured fingers into the triangular hole and scraped the newly-formed scar tissue off against the raw metal. In a moment, there was a satisfactory flow of blood into the can, a flow which he stimulated by repeated scrapings.

When he felt he had the mixture as before, he shook the can a few times, dressed his now messy fingers and poured the whole noisome collation into the large, economy-size bottle of after-shave lotion he had purchased a week before. The bottle was fitted with an atomizer.

"Now," he said, as he tossed the knife and rye bread to the bureau, turned out the lights, crawled into bed and began munching on the salami, "now, let them watch out for Irving Bommer!"

HE FORGOT to set the alarm and was awakened only by the ablutionary matins of the man in the room next door. "Twenty minutes to dress and get to work," he muttered as he threw the sheets apart and leaped to the wash basin. "No breakfast!"

But Mrs. Nagenbeck met him downstairs with an arch smile and a tray. Disregarding his protestations, she insisted he have "at least a bite to chew on in his mouth."

As he frantically forked the scrambled eggs from the soup bowl to his face, jerking his head to avoid Mrs. Nagenbeck's furtive kisses like the human target in a baseball-throwing side-show, he wondered what had happened to his prim, forbidding landlady since the last time he'd seen her.

The last time he'd seen her....

Seizing the opportunity of Mrs. Nagenbeck's departure for a jar of caviar ("so you can have a spread on your bread with your coffee"), he pounded back upstairs to his room.

He ripped off his shirt and tie and, after thinking a bit, his undershirt. He pointed the nozzle of the atomizer at himself and squeezed the rubber bulb. He sprayed his face, his hair, his ears, his neck, his chest, his back, his arms, his navel. He even pushed the nozzle under his belt and sprayed around in a complete circle. When his hand began to knot with the unaccustomed exercise, he desisted at last and began to dress. The odor almost sickened him, yet he felt amazingly light-hearted.

Before he left the room, he shook the huge bottle. Still at least nine-tenths full. So there was another bargain he was making pay off. Before he was through, a lot of things and a lot of people were going to pay off!

The gypsy woman was standing in front of her bedraggled shop when he passed. She started to smile. stopped abruptly and shouted a slippery phrase at her children who ran inside. Backing into the store, she held her nose and wailed at him lu-

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gubriously: "You use too moch! You not suppose use all at wance!"

He tipped her a careless salute as he hurried on. "I didn't. There's lots more where this came from!"

HIS TRAIN was crowded, but he saw a vacant seat from the subway platform. He hit the knot of people clustered about the opening doors and literally untied them. Dodging recklessly into the train, almost singing with self-confidence and happiness, he squeezed past two fairly determined women, expertly kicked a brisk old fellow in the shins to distract him, and was sliding into the seat when the train started. The lurch threw him off balance and enabled a porcelain-faced young lady of twenty or twenty-five—a rank outsider!—to slip in under his probing posterior. By the time he had straightened and turned around, she was grinning at him smugly with a tiny but extremely red mouth.

If there is one thing an habitual subway rider learns, it is that Kismet is inscrutable, seating some and placing others always among the standees. Irving Bommer reached for the overhead bar, adjusting himself to the hard subway law of supply and demand.

The girl's face was twisted as if she were about to cry. She shook her head in spasms, staring up at him and biting her lips. She was breathing very loudly.

She stood up suddenly and indicated the seat with a courtly gesture. "Won't you take it, please?" she asked with a voice wherein the milk was most difficult to distinguish from the honey. "You look tired."

Irving Bommer sat down, acutely conscious of the heads turning in their direction. His neighbor, a somewhat plump nineteen, began sniffing and slowly, incredulously, moved her shining eyes from her historical novel to his face.

The girl who had given him her seat swung in close, though all the other standing passengers were leaning the other way just then. "I'm positive I met you somewhere before," she began with some uncertainty, then more and more rapidly as if she were remembering the words: "My name is Iphigenia Smith and, if you tell me yours, I just know I'll be able to recall exactly where we were introduced."

Irving Bommer sighed deep in his inmost psyche and leaned back. Biology and he had at last developed a rendezvous.

He led a small parade to the employees' entrance of Gregworth's Department Store. Rendered inconsolable by the refusal of the elevator operator to admit customers into the rickety elevator intended solely for personnel, they clustered about the shaft and watched him ascend as if he were Adonis and the winter solstice was approaching.

Humphries caught him scribbling his name on the sign-in pad. "Seven minutes late. Not too good, Bommer, not too good. We want to make an effort to get in on time, don't we? We want to make a real effort."

"Forgot to set the alarm," Irving Bommer mumbled.

"We aren't going to use that one, are we? Let's be adults in Gregworth's; let's face up to our mistakes and try to do better." The buyer pulled his perfectly knotted tie just a fraction tighter and frowned. "What in the world is that smell? Bommer, don't you bathe?"

"A woman spilled something on me in the subway. It'll wear off."

HAVING MADE good his escape, he wended his way past pots, pans and pressure cookers to dicers,

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graters and peelers where he took up his regular station. He had just begun to set the counter up for the day's business when the gong announced that the outside world was now able to enter and secure Gregworth's Greater Bargains.

A hand sliding tremulously across his lapels distracted him. Doris, the blonde, beautiful, salad bowls and baking dishes, was leaning across his counter and was caressing him. Doris! She who usually made loud, retching sounds whenever he aimed a bright cliche at her!

He grabbed her chin. "Doris," he said sternly, "do you love me?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Yes, darling, yes. More than any—"

He kissed her twice, first quickly, then with more savor as he observed she didn't leap away, but moaned deliriously instead and writhed a whole row of projecting nickel-plated graters out of position.

Fingers snapping loudly made him jerk back and push her away.

"Now, now, now, now," said Humphries, glaring at Irving Bommer with a slight uncertainty. "We have a time and a place for everything, don't we? Let's be business-like; we have customers to wait on. Let's attend to private matters after closing time."

The girl shot the buyer a look of purest hatred, but at Irving's dismissing wave and Humphries' further finger-snaps, she turned away slowly, saying in a low, insistent tone: "I'll wait for you after work, Irving darling. I'll go home with you. Everywhere, forever. . ."

"Don't know what happened to that clerk," Humphries mused. "Used to be the steadiest in salad bowls and baking dishes." He turned back to Irving Bommer, seemed to struggle with himself, then began mildly: "In any case, Bommer, let us not go off the deep end. Customers are coming up; let's start pushing graters, let's move our slicers." He picked up a bone handle attached to a long, twisted blade and flourished it at an early group of women shoppers congregated around Irving's counter. "The latest way to cut grapefruit, oranges and melons, ladies. The only way. Why have old-fashioned straight and severe lines around your servings?" His voice, which had been contemptuous, soared away to contemplate the lotus: "With the new Hollywood Dream Slicer you cut your grapefruit, oranges and melons easily and efficiently. No more losing valuable, vitamin-filled juices; no more melon stains on delicate lace tablecloths. And above all, you have attractive scalloped edges. Children love to eat interestingly cut grapefruit, oranges—"

"Is that what he's selling?" asked a huge female with a musclebound jaw. Humphries nodded.

"Then I'll take one. If he gives it to me."

"I'll take two. Will he give me two?"

"Five! I want five. I asked first and you didn't hear me."

"Now, ladies," Humphries beamed. "Let's not push, let's not squabble. There are more than enough Hollywood Dream Slicers to go around. See, Bommer, see," he hissed, "what a little sales talk can do for us? Let's not miss one of these sales; let's hustle."

HE WALKED away happily, snapping his fingers at surrounding counters whose feminine custodians were all leaning disturbingly in the same Bommertropism. "Let's straighten up, girls; let's be brisk and meet the Business Day. And, at that," he mused, as he toddled back to his office to insult the first batch of manufacturers' representatives, "at that, it looks like a banner day in dicers,

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graters and peelers."

How right he was, he did not begin to suspect until shortly before lunch hour, when the chief stock clerk burst in on him and screamed, "You gotta put more men on, Humphries. The stock department can't carry the load!"

"Load? Which load?"

"The load to and from Bommer's counter, that's which load!" The chief stock clerk threw away a handful of hair and danced around the desk. "I have all my men assigned to that one counter, not a man on inventory, not a man on receiving, and as fast as we get the stuff to him, he sells it. Why didn't you tell me you were going to have a giveaway sale on dicers, graters and peelers? I'd've ordered more stuff from the warehouse, instead of having to yip at them every half-hour. I'd've asked Cohen in modernistic furniture or Blake in children's sport clothes to lend me a coupla men!"

Humphries shook his head. "There's no sale in dicers, graters and peelers, not a giveaway sale, nor a seasonal sale nor even a plain bargain sale. Get a grip on yourself, man; let's not fall apart under unexpected pressure. Let's take a look and find out what is what."

He opened the door of his office and immediately learned the exact technique of standing aghast. Housewares was jammed with a gasping, surging mass of females, aimed at the dicers, graters and peelers counter. Irving Bommer was completely hidden behind a flood of permanent waves and crazily perched hats but, from time to time, an empty carton would sail out of what Humphries approximated as his geographic position and a thin, cracked voice could be heard calling: "Get me more dicers, stock, get me more! I'm running out. They're getting restless!" Every other counter on the floor was deserted—by clerks as well as customers.

Bellowing, "Hold them, Bommer; hold them, boy!" the buyer shot his cuffs and charged in. As he worked his way past women clasping whole cartons of potato peelers to their laboring breasts, he observed that the peculiar odor emanating from Bommer was now noticeable even at a distance. And it had grown stronger, more pungent . . . .

IRVING BOMMER looked like a man who had gone down into the Valley of the Shadow and had seen much more there to fear besides such picayune things as Evil. His collar shoulder, his glasses hung from the was open, his tie flapped over one opposite ear, his eyes were streaked madly with red, and sweat bubbled from him so furiously that his clothes appeared to have been recently withdrawn from a washing machine.

He was very badly frightened. While he had wares with which to distract them, the adoration was relatively passive. But as soon as his stock ran low, the women began to concentrate on his person again. There was no obvious rivalry among them; they merely pushed against each other to get a better view. In the beginning, he had told a few to go home and they had obeyed; now, though they seemed willing to do as he told them in every other respect, they absolutely refused to leave his presence. The affection they displayed had become more insistent, more determined—and more united. Dimly, he realized that this was due to his prodigious rate of perspiration—the sweat mixed with the love potion and diluted it still more, spread his odor still further abroad.

And the caresses! He had never known how painful a feminine touch could be. Every time he reeled down the counter to fill an order, hands—

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dozens of them—would reach out and stroke his arms, his chest, any part of his body that was accessible. Multiplied by the three hours it had been going on, the gentle touches had begun to feel like so many roundhouse punches.

He almost wept when Humphries slid into the counter by his side. "You got to get me more stock, Mr. Humphries," he babbled. "All I got left are egg-plant graters and a few cabbage dicers. When they go, I go."

"Steady, boy, steady there," the buyer told him. "This is our test; let's meet it like a man. Are we going to be an effective, dependable clerk, or a reed that no large retailer dares lean upon? Where are those sales girls? They should be behind the counter, helping you. Well, it'll be a while before we get another shipment. Let's take a break; let's try to interest them in towel racks and toiletware."

"Hey," an arm encased in mouton lamb reached across the counter and tapped Humphries on the shoulder. "Move, I can't see him."

"One moment, madam, let's not get impatient," Humphries began brightly, then stopped before the murderous look in the woman's eyes. She—and the others around her, he noticed—looked quite capable of shoving a Hollywood Dream Slicer into his heart without tremor. He gulped and tried to shoot his cuffs. "Even for Gregworth's—" he began.

"Look, Mr. Humphries, can I go home?" Irving asked him tearfully. "I don't feel at all well. And now that the stock is gone, there's not much point in my sticking around."

"Well," the buyer considered, "we can't say that we haven't had a busy day, can we now? And if we don't feel well, we don't feel well. Of course, we can't expect pay for the afternoon, but we can go home."

Irving said, "Gee, thanks." He started for the counter exit, but Humphries caught him by the elbow.

He coughed. "Just thought I'd tell you, Bommer, that that odor isn't offensive at all. Quite pleasant, in fact. Hope I didn't offend you by my thoughtless remark anent your bathing."

"No, that's all right. You didn't offend me."

"I'm glad. I shouldn't like to offend you. I want you to like me, Bommer, I want you to feel that I'm your friend. Really, I—"

IRVING BOMMER fled. He dodged through the female multitude, and everywhere they moved back to make way for him, everywhere they reached out and touched—just touched!—some part of his pain-flooded anatomy.

He broke free long enough to get into the service elevator and shivered at the hungry, despairing moan that went up when the elevator doors closed in the earnest faces of the advance guard. As he descended, he heard a girlish voice sing out: "I know where he lives, everybody! I'll take you to his home!"

They were so damned cooperative, he groaned. He'd always dreamed of being a male god, but he'd never anticipated that one of a god's characteristics is that he is worshipped unselfishly. Although, he reflected, there would be one terrific scrimmage if each woman insisted on keeping him for herself.

He ran out of the elevator on the ground floor and hailed a taxi, observing that the girl operator had followed him out unswervingly and was also getting one. As he gave frenzied directions to the driver, he saw that all over the street women were climbing into cabs and commandeering buses.

"Hurry, hurry," he chattered at the

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driver. "Fast, fast, fast."

"I'm doing the best I can, fella," the man told him over his shoulder. "I observe traffic regulations. Which is more than I can say for those dumb dames back there."

Peeping despairingly through the rear window, Irving Bommer saw a complete disregard of red lights, arm-flailing policemen and intersecting traffic as the cars behind him charged on. Every time his driver stopped, they picked up more motorized maternity.

And yet the sweat poured out of him more luxuriantly than ever as his fear increased, and yet the effluvium of Irving Bommer spread more widely through the streets.

He'd take a bath when he got home—that's what he'd do—he'd take a shower with some strong soap and wash the awful stuff off. But he'd have to hurry.

The taxi's brakes shrieked with the effort of gripping the wheels. "There you are, mister. This is as far as I can go. Some sort of riot going on."

As he paid the driver, Irving Bommer looked ahead and winced. The street was black with women.

THE BOTTLE of after-shave lotion—that's what it was. There was an open nozzle on it, and some of the odor had seeped out. The bottle was nearly full, so it must have been quite powerful. Still, if just leakage could do this...

The women stood about in the street, in the yard, in the alleyway, their faces turned up to his room like dogs who had treed a possum. They were very patient, very quiet, but every once in a while a sigh would start up and swell to the volume of a cannon roar.

"Listen," he told the driver. "Wait for me. I may be back."

"That I can't promise. Don't like the looks of the mob."

Irving Bommer pulled his jacket over his head and ran for the entrance of his boarding-house. Faces—startled, happy faces—began turning in his direction.

"That's him!" he heard Mrs. Nagenbeck's hoarse voice. "That's our wonderful Irving Bommer!"

"Heem! Heem!" That was the gypsy woman. "The 'ansome wan!"

"Make way there," he yelled roughly. "Get out of my way." Reluctantly, adoringly, the mob moved back and made a path for him. He pushed the front door open just as the first of the pursuing vehicles roared around the corner.

There were women in the hall, there were women in the parlor and the dining room, there were women all the way up the stairs to his room. He pushed past them, past their swimming eyes and agonizing caresses, and unlocked the door of his room. He slammed it shut.

"Got to think, think," he patted his wobbling head with a feverish hand. A bath wouldn't be enough, not while the huge bottle of after-shave lotion remained to disseminate its fearful contents. Pour it down the drain? It would mix with water, dilute still further. Besides, he might get female sewer rats charging at him next. No, the potion had to be destroyed. How? How?

The furnace in the cellar. There was alcohol in the after-shave lotion, and alcohol burned. Burn the stuff, then take a shower fast, not using puerile soap but something truly effective like lye—or sulphuric acid. The furnace in the cellar!

He plumped the bottle under his arm like a football. Outside, he could hear a hundred automobile horns honking, a thousand female voices sighing and muttering of their love. In the distance, very faintly, was the

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sound of police sirens and the disgusted, amazed voice of the law, trying to move that which was thoroughly determined to be immovable.

The moment he unlocked the door, he felt he had made a mistake. Women poured in as if the combination of the potion, his perspiration and the seeping bottle were absolutely irresistible.

"Back," he roared. "Get back! I'm coming through!"

MORE SLOWLY than before, more reluctantly, they let him out. He fought his way to the head of the stairs, his body twisting and writhing every time a soft hand wavered in his direction. "Clear the stairs, dammit, clear the stairs!"

Some retreated, others didn't. But he could go down. Holding the bottle tightly, he started forward. A young, barely nubile girl extended her arms lovingly. He threw his body to one side. Unfortunately, his right foot had started down on the first step. He teetered on his left. His body moved forward; he squirmed for balance. A grey-haired matron started to caress his back and he arched it out.

Too far. He fell, the bottle shooting out of his sweaty grasp before him.

He hit a couple of steps on the way and finally piled painfully on the ruins of the bottle. He realized his chest was very wet.

He looked up and managed to scream just once as the torrent of yearning, of adoring, of beseeching faces closed over him.

That's why they have a hunk of blood-stained linoleum buried in White Willow Cemetery. And that immense monument above it was raised by enthusiastic public subscription in a single hour.

THE END

OF POEMS and BREAD and LAMPS

By Wilton Avery MacDonald

IF YOU THINK that novel you're reading is too long, don't complain. It was in the good old days that they were really wordy! Written between 400 BC and 150 BC, the longest poem in the world is titled "Mahabharata". It takes up 18 large volumes, a total of 5,400 pages. It has 110,000 couplets—or 220,000 lines—divided into 2,009 chapters.

It tells the story of the descendants of King Bharata and the ancient India in which they lived and ruled. The poem is a vast repository of information of Hindu traditional lore, philosophy and legend. While the Indian poet Vyasa is credited with the arrangement of this great work, it is really the product of many generations of Brahman writers through nearly a whole millennium.

"Mahabharata" is more than eight times as long as Homer's "Illiad" and "Odyssey" combined, and nearly four times as long as the entire Bible.

* * *

HERE'S a comforting note to housewives who worry about the bread getting stale. In a museum in Cairo, Egypt is what remains of a loaf of bread which was found in the tomb of one of the ancient Egyptian queens. Experts claim this loaf of bread to be between 4,000 and 5,000 years old.

* * *

A TINY neon glow lamp which will burn steadily for three years, is the latest achievement of the General Electric Company. This lamp which is the longest burning electric lamp in the world, is used on switchboards, radios, and various electrical apparatus to indicate whether the current is off or on.

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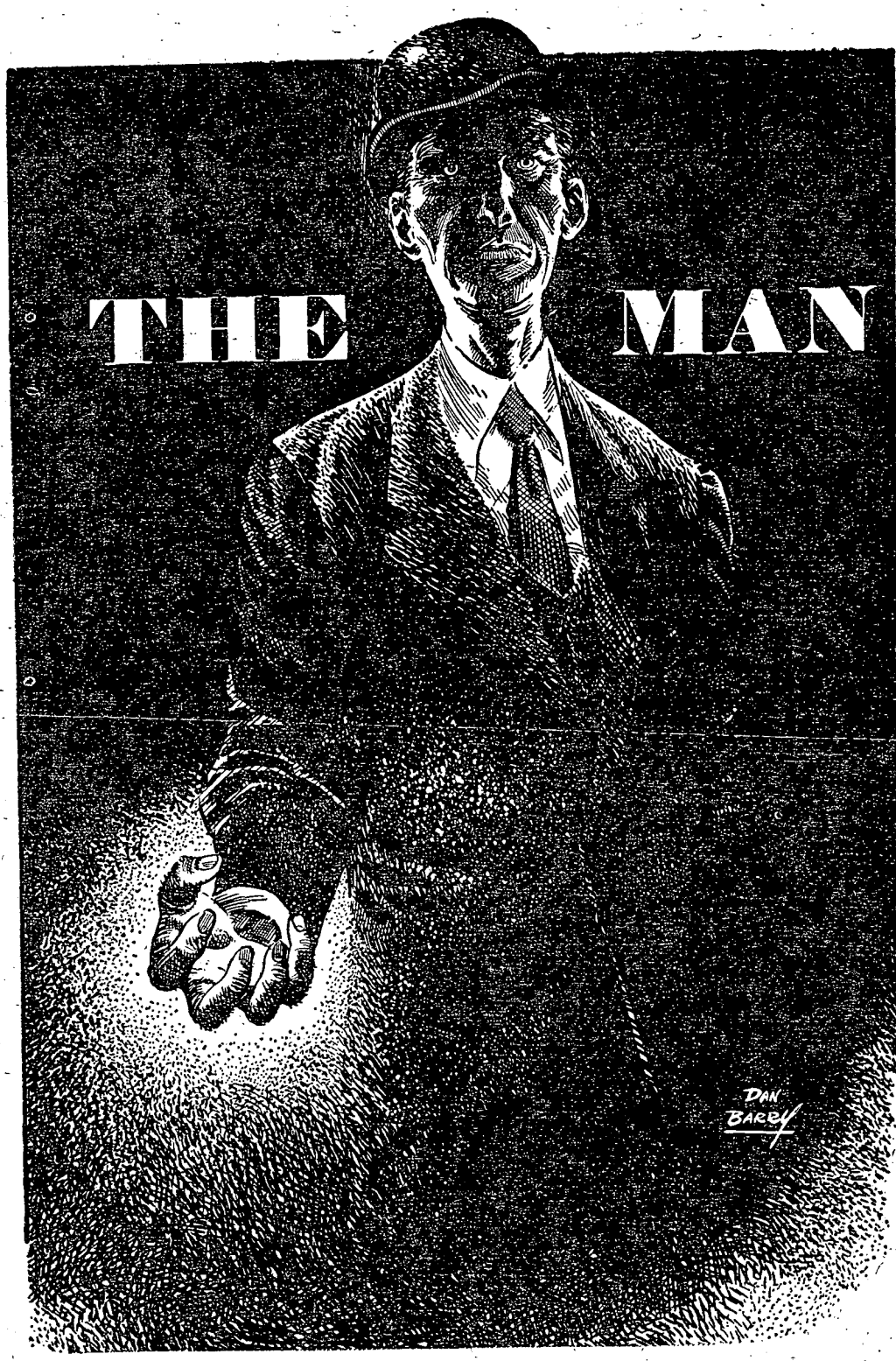

He gave the impression that he was always in the act of receiving dishonest money furtively

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By Paul W. Fairman

With The CLUTCHING HAND

Who is the little man with the outstretched palm? Does he really exist? Or are you seeing things?

IT WAS ONLY through the hand that he stood out. It was at the end of a malformed right arm that he held close to his side at all times as far down as the elbow. From the elbow, the arm jutted straight forward to give the impression that he was always in the act of receiving a dishonest return in a very furtive manner.

The hand itself was held palm up, the fingers spread and curved like a clutching claw. Otherwise, the man was nothing; a slight, wispy body clad in ragged and neutral black, with a derby hat and a beaklike nose on a face remindful of the cutting edge of an ax.

He entered the restaurant in mid-afternoon when there was but a single customer in the place: A poorly dressed young man seated at the far end of the counter. He fumbled a moment with his derby hat, then walked the length of the narrow room and sat down on the stool next to the young man.

The latter, deep in his own thoughts, was hardly aware of the new presence until the newcomer said, "I know where there is a great deal of money, Mr. Morrow."

Young Morrow turned with a frown of annoyance. A snarling word was on his lips, but at that moment the blonde waitress came with a fresh glass of water. The intruder smiled waspishly in her direction and ordered, "Coffee, please."

As he spoke, young Morrow's attention fell to the man's clutching hand and was held thereon—negatively, but nonetheless held. He studied the precise right angle of the elbow and the rigid position of the forearm.

His eyes dwelt upon the widely spread arced fingers, and he wondered idly whether or not this was the result of some accident or whether it had been a congenital condition.

Now he realized the waitress had left and that the man was watching him. He flushed slightly and lowered his eyes, thus losing his initial advantage of justified annoyance.

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"My name is Pope, Mr. Morrow. You may call me that. And about this money—it can be had."

Young Morrow was fascinated by the clutching hand. The waitress had returned with the coffee and he used the moment to stare again at it. It was an ugly thing, typifying somehow, all the cruel avariciousness of mankind. When Mr. Pope again looked his way, Morrow asked, "How did you know my name?"

The answering smile revealed small, glistening teeth—predatory teeth. "I'm not quite sure. I must have passed you in the street and heard it spoken by a friend. But about this money; there is a great deal of it. You like money, don't you? You need money?"

THIS TOUCHED the valve to Morrow's morose ponderings. He'd been engaged with these upon Pope's entrance. Morrow's eyelids drooped. "I never needed it so bad in my life."

"Excellent. And you are certainly entitled to it. Every man is entitled to money. And in the place of which I speak, there is enough for you and me and many others."

Morrow scowled afresh. "Now wait a minute. What is this anyhow? You come in here and sit down and—"

Mr. Pope had set down his coffee cup and was now idly scratching the palm of his clutching right hand with the sharp nail of his left forefinger. There was the brittle sound of the nail against the hardened, dried-out skin of the palm.

Morrow lifted his own coffee cup hastily in order to tear his eyes away from the hand. Pope said, "Did you ever visualize yourself with one hundred thousand dollars to call your own? A bushel basket full of green money. *Money,* my friend. Cash. The coin of the realm."

"Where is all this money you talk about?"

"In the Shoreman's National Bank."

"Morrow's cup hit the saucer with a rattling sound. "Now listen! Wait a minute!"

Mr. Pope smiled. "You know, then, what I'm referring to?"

"How the hell could I keep from knowing? But you come in here and brace a guy you never saw before and—"

"But I have seen you before. I knew your name, did I not?"

"That's kind of funny—how you knew my name."

"But unimportant. The important thing is the money—lying there waiting for us. You are an electrician, are you not?"

"And a damn good one," Morrow said with truculence. I've worked on jobs that..." Morrow came to a lame halt vocally as his eyes went again to the evil clutching hand of Mr. Pope.

Pope said, "I'm sure of that. We need a man like you to help us do the burglar alarm."

Morrow sneered. "A burglar alarm's the easiest thing in the world to knock out."

"Of course—for a man of your abilities. Just think, Mr. Morrow: One hundred thousand dollars in green money for just a moment's work. And money you're entitled to! Why should executives of great companies roll in wealth—men with no greater intelligence than you—while you sit wondering about your next meal?"

MORROW RAISED his eyes from the deformed hand and rubbed his chin. "Yeah—yeah, you got something there. They ain't no smarter than I am."

But then the first suspicion came

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back. "But just who the hell are you? How come you come barging in here and plank your prat down like we was old friends?"

Mr. Pope shrugged. "I could answer you, but it's so unimportant. Would you let a question like that keep you from getting your hands on good green money. *Money*, my friend."

"Oh, c a g e y, huh?" Morrow scratched again at the stubble on his chin.

"We'll call it that. Let's just say I'm looking for a good man."

Morrow slanted his eyes downward, evidently striving for caginess himself. "Who's in on this? Just you and me?"

"Two others."

"You looked it over? It's been cased?"

"Amply. One hundred thousand dollars, my friend. Money."

The waitress went by. Morrow watched her pick up, with crimson fingernails, the two nickels lying on the counter. He thought of the four remaining nickels in his pocket.

"Yeah—money. It's great stuff."

"The stuff you need."

"When you figuring on the job?"

"Tonight."

This startled Morrow. "Tonight?"

"Why wait? The money is there. It may as well be yours tomorrow as next week."

"These other guys. Friends of yours?"

Pope smiled. His smile was like a gash in bright steel. "All men are my friends—to one extent or another. Tonight?"

Morrow licked his thin lips.

"Excellent. The door is in the rear. You are to meet us at ten on the corner near the bank. You know its location?"

"I know."

"There is a door in the alley. That is where your electrical knowledge comes in. One hundred thousand dollar knowledge. *Money* knowledge!"

"The alarm wire is probably inside the bank."

"No. It is exposed high on the wall. We will have a ladder."

"Sounds...good."

"At ten then. Good day."

Morrow watched Mr. Pope quit his stool and move sinisterly toward the door. He wondered if anyone ever dropped a nickel in that outstretched hand. He ordered another cup of coffee. He shivered. Then he thought of the money and felt warmed.

IN THE GLOW of a lonely street lamp in the financial district, young Morrow saw Pope's obscene hand pushed forth as though clutching at ungotten millions. Mr. Pope whispered, "Good evening. You are on time," and Morrow saw the other two men, like gaunt shadows against a cold brick wall.

Mr. Pope rubbed the stiff fingers of his deformed member and said, "It's time we got started. The watchman has made his rounds. We'll have twenty minutes to complete the operation." He picked up a bag of tools on the walk beside him. "Everything we need is here and every man knows exactly what he is to do."

He started toward the alley entrance nearby, then stopped. "Oh—there have been no introductions. "Morrow, this is Mr. Pane—and Mr. Brinkley. They have already been introduced." He beamed about impartially, the smile almost benign.

Brinkley, a stringbean of a man with a hang-dog look, shuffled his feet. "I dunno about this. I dunno."

"Why, Brinkley! Are you losing your nerve?" With an unconscious gesture, Mr. Pope scratched at the brittle palm of his hand. "Have you forgotten the *money?*"

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"No—I ain't forgot."

"You need money, don't you?"

"Sure I need dough."

"Then come. Let us be about our business."

The three of them followed Mr. Pope's confident footsteps into the darkness of the alley beside the Shoreman's National Bank. They heard the sound of the tool bag being placed upon the rough brick pavement.

Morrow felt a hand upon his arm, heard a whisper: "The alarm box is up there. The ladder is already in place. I saw to that."

Morrow felt cold tools being thrust into his palms.

"These are what you will need. Now—up and at it."

Morrow climbed the ladder and found the box. He pried it open and felt around inside with practiced fingers. It was easy. A few moments later he was down again.

"All set?"

"All set."

Mr. Pope handed Pane a short crow-bar. "Now for you," he said, and Pane advanced upon the heavy metal door. There was an interval of silence punctuated by heavy breathing and the sound of steel on steel. Then a snapping sound and a grunt of satisfaction.

Then the frantic screeching of a burglar alarm.

The crowbar made a faint ringing as it hit the bricks. Mr. Pope's calm voice tinged only with polite surprise: "Why, it wasn't the alarm at all in that box up there. Run for it, boys."

They chose, as one man, the far entrance of the alley, and their feet pounded hollow noises out of the bricks as they ran. The burglar alarm crescendoed even higher, it seemed, and the breath tore in their throats as the fear tore in their hearts.

Almost to the far mouth of the alley, they came to a skidding halt. A car was turning in, its headlights flaming at them. Now a new siren welled up.

They turned and ran back as they'd come—back almost to the other alley mouth—but only to skid again to a halt. Another car made a screeching turn and bore down upon them.

There was nothing to do. They stood still, trembling.

SERGEANT WILSON came out of the inner room to slump into a chair beside the desk of Sergeant Davis who was making notes on the police blotter.

"Damndest thing I ever saw," Wilson said. "Absolutely, beyond all doubt, the stupidest caper ever pulled."

Davis grinned. "Because we're on our toes for once and nail a bank gang in the act—they're just stupid."

"No. I mean it. Here's three guys trying to crack into a bank through a door that wouldn't have gotten them any place if they'd made it. Only up against a steel cage they couldn't have cut through in a week. So dumb they think an old light company box on the wall is the burglar alarm and they're surprised as all hell when the busted door gives a signal."

Davis shook his head. "We get all kinds."

"But these three. They're not only stupid, but they're nuts. All nuts the same way."

"How so?"

"They swear up and down there was a fourth guy with them there in the alley. They all describe him the same way. A little monkey, maybe fifty, with a game duke. A stiff hand he's always got poked out like he was mooching dough."

"They claim he was with them?"

"Yeah. They say he was the brain

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and brought the tools. They say he was in the alley and started running with them. Well, what the hell? If there was a fourth guy with them, where did he go? Through the wall? There wasn't a window or a door the whole length of the alley. I tell you they're bugs, those three!"

"We get all kinds."

YOUNG MORROW was sweating as he had never sweated before. And pleading, desperate-eyed. "I tell you he was there! Right with us. It was all his idea. Right from the start! He planned it and had the tools in that satchel!"

Out beyond the cone of light in which young Morrow sat, Sergeant Wilson—now back at work—sighed with weariness. "Yeah—yeah. We found the tools. But there wasn't any little man with a clutched-out hand."

"I tell you there was," Morrow screamed. "There was! THERE WAS!"

"Take it easy," Wilson said in disgust. "You'll split a gut."

Another voice, unidentified, beyond the cone of light, said, "All right. Where did you meet this guy? What do you know about him? Tell us where we can find him."

Morrow sought to gather in his chaotic thoughts. "In—in a restaurant. That was where! I was having a cup of coffee in some greasy spoon, and this guy comes in and sits down beside me. He talks about dough and this job on the bank. I—I fall for it." Morrow lowered his head into his hands and sobbed.

A voice out beyond the light. A tired voice: "The other two claim he dropped out of the sky the same way. Pane says the guy sidled up to him on a street corner. Brinkley says he came and sat down beside him on a bus. I never heard such a cooked-up yarn."

Wilson reached out and raised Morrow's head. "Look, son. You say he showed up in a restaurant. You remember which one?"

"Sure—sure I remember which one."

"Anybody else see him?"

"The restaurant was empty. There wasn't anybody else there."

Wilson made an eloquent gesture. Then was jerked up by Morrow's frantic words: "The waitress! She saw him! She served us coffee. Get her in here. She'll prove I'm telling the truth."

"It's easier to take you there. That is, if you can find the joint. I'll lay eight to five you can't."

THEY SAT at the far end of the counter as before. Only now, Sergeant Wilson's broad bulk supplanted that of Mr. Pope. The waitress stood across the counter from them, leaning her knuckles on the marble. Wilson was pointing at Morrow.

"Yes, I remember him. It was slow yesterday—that's why. He was in here drinking coffee."

"And the man who was with him?" Sergeant Wilson asked.

"Yeah—yeah," young Morrow added eagerly. "The old guy with the funny hand. He sat right there and had coffee too."

The waitress' eyes shot questions. "Another man?"

"Sure—sure. He had a hand that was spread out like it was reaching kind of. He had a black derby hat on."

"I don't remember seeing anybody else."

There was a dead, quiet pause while the waitress eyed both men suspiciously. "What are you trying to give me? There wasn't any other man. No man with any kind of hands or any kind of a hat. Just you."

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"You're covering him up!" Morrow screamed. "You're a friend of his! You two framed it!"

The waitress frowned in complete puzzlement. She turned to Wilson, indicating Morrow with a jerk of her thumb. "What's with this guy? What's he talking about?" She turned her eyes, now hostile, on Morrow. "You trying to get me in trouble?"

He was a friend of yours! You're covering him up?"

Wilson laid his hands on Morrow, firmly. "Quiet down, you. Take it easy. I'm about at the end of my patience."

Morrow wilted in discouragement. Wilson turned to the waitress. "You take it easy, too. Nobody's going to put you in a spot, but let's make it official. You saw this man in here yesterday afternoon—is that right?"

"That's right."

"And he was entirely alone. There was no one with him."

"Not a single solitary soul."

Wilson sighed. "That ties it. Let's go, you."

"You got to find him," Morrow whispered in desperation. "You've got to."

BUT THEY never did because—even at that moment—the man with the clutching hand was sliding up to a younger man who stared, sullen-eyed, into a jewelry store window in a city far across the world—in another country.

Mr. Pope was saying, "It's easy—very easy. You merely take a paving block—a small one—and hurl it through the glass. Then you reach in and take what you want. It's very, very simple."

The young man whirled in indignation. Then he saw the strange clutching hand, stiff and taut, in front of Mr. Pope.

He stared at it.

THE END

A TON OF STAR

By

Sandy Miller

ONE OF THE heaviest things in existence is the white dwarf star called "The Companion Star of Sirius". This brilliant star in the constellation Orion, is located very near Sirius, and may be seen here in the United States on any winter night.

It is 61,000 times as dense as water. In fact, it is so dense, that if the star dust from it were substituted for salt in your salt shaker, not only would your table collapse from its weight, but the floor would probably collapse also. One cubic inch of this star weighs a ton, so that an ordinary suitcase filled with it would weigh as much as eight large locomotives. A wedding ring made from this star material would weigh as much as a baby elephant, and would certainly be difficult to place on the finger of even an anxious bride.

Of course, there may be other unknown stars that are denser than the Companion to Sirius. According to theory, Ven Maanen's Star is several million times as dense as water, but the actual verification of this has not as yet been established.

What is the largest thing in existence today? As far as we know, the giant star Antares in the constellation Scorpio is about one of the largest things in existence. This is on the basis that "thing" is a "portion of matter" not always visible or touchable. Air is matter, any gas or mixture of gases is matter.

Antares is more than 110,000,000 times the size of the sun; approximately 125,000,000,000,000 times the size of Earth.

Antares is made up of the rarest gases, which are so thin they compare with any laboratory vacuum. Despite its size, Antares is 390 light years away from Earth, a distance far enough to make it difficult for us to see without a telescope.

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UNDER THE DISAPPEARING MOON

By Frederic Booth

IT IS NOT generally realized, but the Earth is gradually losing the Moon! Good old Luna is drifting slowly away from Terra. True the rate of drift is small—a mere five feet per century—but in geologic or astronomic time this is at a good clip, indeed. Study of this phenomenon by astronomers is leading them to go back to their original theory of the Moon's formation—that is, that it is essentially a torn-away chunk of the Earth. The Pacific Ocean is supposed to be the wound-scar of this monstrous catastrophe.

In the beginning when the Earth was primarily liquid, rotational forces were set up which destroyed the balance of things. As a result, this vast lump of Terra was thrown into space and despite the tremendous gravitational forces involved, Luna is still drifting outward.

The Moon's motion is so erratic and irregular that despite the best efforts of modern astronomers, its path is not completely described. This is in full accordance then with the fact that the Moon is still spiralling outward from the Earth at a slow but measurable rate. Someday we may lose the Moon!

This then is an earnest prayer to the rocketeers to get busy, to get on the ball and plant a few rockets on old Luna before she isn't with us any longer! Come on, White Sands—throw out a rocket!

STRANGER...

By Charles Recour

A fantastic vignette

"THANKS!" The last note inflected risingly as the cab driver took the dollar tip. The tall, well-dressed man smiled and stood by his luggage. The doorman of the exclusive New York hotel, the Netherlands-Sherry, hastily summoned two bell-hops to take the stranger's luggage. Obviously *this* man was a gentleman, and the doorman's lips curled pleasantly in anticipation of the generous tip *he'd* receive.

Staggering under the heavy, very heavy bags and grips, the bell-hops brought the luggage into the lobby while the calm gentleman registered at the desk.

"...the five room suite on seventeen is simply charming," the clerk was saying. "I just know you'll enjoy it, sir."

"Fine," the stranger said scrawling his name and address in the book. There was the faintest trace of a foreign accent intermingled with the cultured English tones.

"I'll have your luggage taken up at once, Mr. Fellaine," the clerk said subserviently. With alacrity the bell-boys obeyed the order to take "this gentleman's luggage to 1712..." —they had been tipped off by the doorman.

After Mr. Fellaine had entered his suite, and dismissed the bell-boys, his mask of calmness dropped abruptly. Ripping off his coat, he strode to the door, made sure it was locked and then returned to the stack of luggage. From a ring of keys, he managed to open the numerous locks that seemed strangely out of place. What need is there for locking luggage like a bank-vault?

As lid after lid of the suit-cases and trunks came open, the peculiar nature of Mr. Fellaine came to light. The luggage was a maze of scientific apparatus!

Wasting no time at all, Mr. Fellaine set to work. Everything was ready and prepared and within ten minutes time, he had made the numerous connections—simply slip-in fastenings. He took one last look at the arrangement. Then he closed a switch. He observed the clock mechanism functioning smoothly.

He picked up the phone. "Desk?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Is there anything you wish?"

"I'm planning to sleep at once. Please do not disturb me until tomorrow morning. If I should have any callers, any at all, do not permit them to come up."

"Yes, sir!"

Mr. Fellaine took one last look around. He put his coat and hat on, went out and locked the door. Glancing around cautiously, he made for the service steps, ignoring the elevators. Within minutes he was in the alley from which he quickly made his way to the street. He hailed a cab.

"La Guardia Field," he said.

Two hours later, Mr. Fellaine was comfortably ensconced in the cabin of an airliner winging south to Miami. And back in New York, the apparatus hummed slightly, and the clock ticked gently and New York was unaware. And tomorrow that portion of Manhattan would be gone...and in a dozen cities other Mr. Fellaine's were boarding airliners in a desperate hurry...

And don't you think that could really happen?...are you sure you can't believe it would happen?...maybe even now...

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VERY COLD FOR CONQUEST

By P. F. Costello

Finding a ship cast adrift on the Caribbean Sea is not too unusual. But this one was either a ghost from the past—or an apparition of the future . . .

The crew reached for their oars—but too late. Suddenly, the strange craft had come alive

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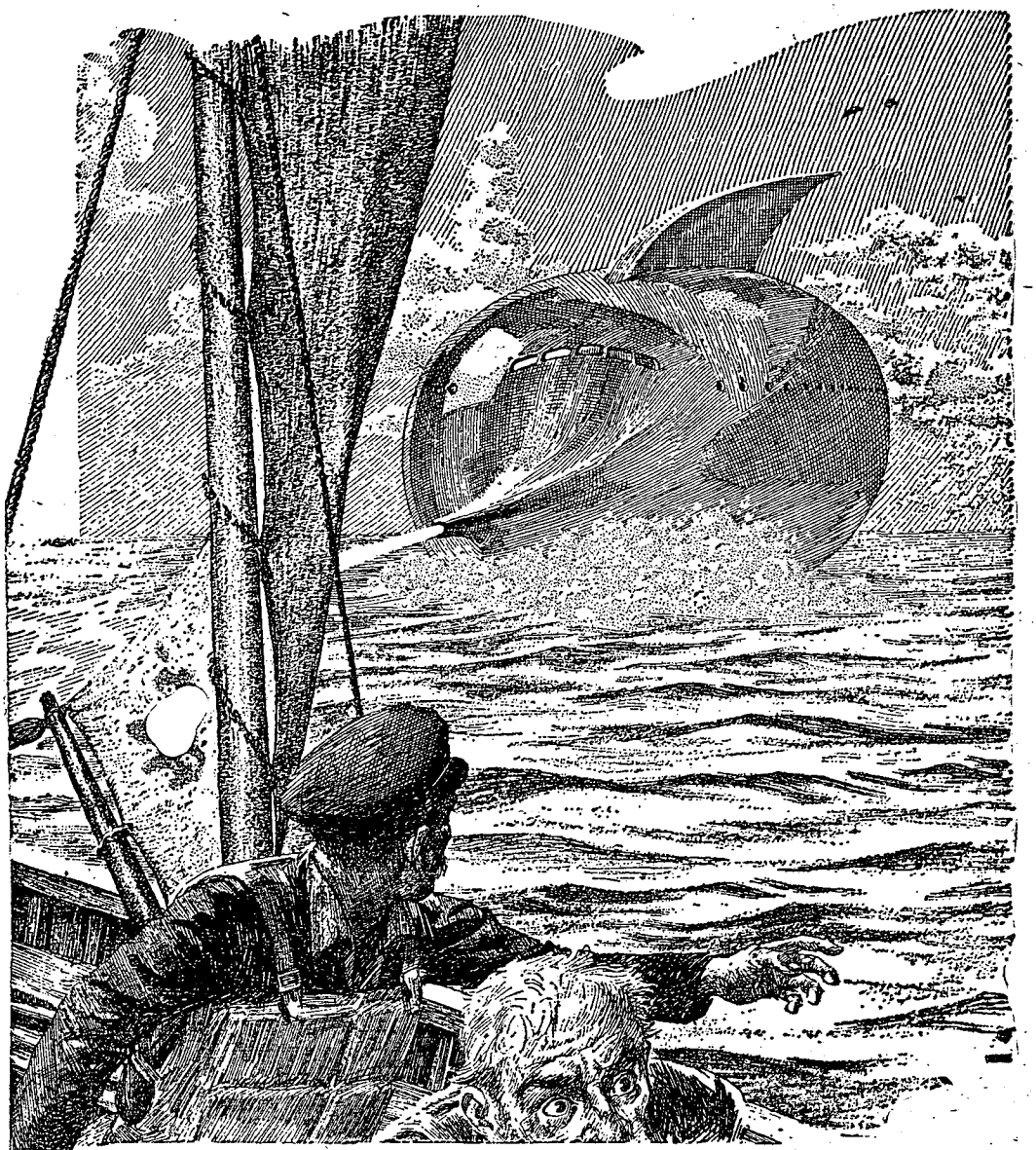

ONE LATE afternoon, with the sun bringing out the high blue of Caribbean waters, an old PBY, somewhat off course, passed over a small, rocky island.

The pilot and owner of the craft glanced down in idle curiosity; then his eyes squinted suddenly. He said, "Take 'em, Nick," to his co-pilot, relinquished the controls, and reached for a pair of binoculars.

He studied the island for a few moments through the glasses before saying, "Bring her around. There's someone down there on that rockpile. Looks like a woman."

The PBY came around like a clumsy stiff-winged pelican, canted in, and sat down in the water on the lee-side of the island.

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The woman could be plainly seen now; a worn, skinny hag with scarcely any clothing to cover her thin wasted body. She stood at the water's edge waving frantically as though in fear of the ship rising even now and winging away without her.

The co-pilot stared wide-eyed, muttered, "Well, I'll be damned," and almost flubbed his controls.

The pilot said, "You and me both. Haul her in a little closer and then hold her. I'll wade ashore."

"Better take a coat. That dame's practically naked!"

The pilot arrived on the beach, soaked to the hips, carrying an Eisenhower jacket. Hardly adequate, it was all he had, and it would have to do for the time being.

The woman, standing some yards down the beach, was now overcome with some uncertainty, generated either by modesty or sudden fear. She took a few backward steps, then waited, poised for running, as the PBY pilot approached.

"It's all right," he called. "I won't hurt you. I saw you signaling." He spoke on in an even voice, scarcely aware of what he was saying; bent only upon quieting her until he could get close. She allowed him to approach, staring at him with wide, vacant eyes. He laid the jacket gently over her shoulders.

"It's all right," he repeated, his voice now charged with pity. "We'll have you out of here in no time."

She did not answer, merely stood there, trembling slightly, while the pilot looked about him, possibly hunting other human derelicts. He saw now what had been invisible from the air—a small hut neatly camouflaged with chunks of coral on the roof. He turned to the woman. "Are you all alone?"

She nodded in a quick jerking motion, then looked up at the sky. But her gaze was not now vacant. She appeared to be looking for something and there was fear in her expression.

"Tell me," she said, in a dry whispering voice. "Did the ships ever come?"

The pilot laid a gentle arm over her frail shoulders. "We'll be landside in an hour," he said. "Then everything will be fine. Just now you'd better not talk too much. Here—let me carry you to the boat."

But she made no move to cooperate; stood staring up into the sky. She repeated the question: "Did the ships ever come?"

The pilot glanced helplessly at the big flying boat as though seeking help in making his answer. Then he said, "Sure—sure. They came. A whole raft of them. Now just put your arm over my shoulders...."

The woman smiled. "I knew they would, of course. Ralph said they would. He said they'd come, and Ralph was always right."

The pilot picked her up gently and started wading into the sea. While in the PBY, the co-pilot stared down at the approaching pair and muttered, "What about that dame!" He shook his head slowly and scratched his thick mass of curly blond hair.

Yes, what about this dame? Alone on a coral pimple far out in the Caribbean Sea. What about this stark scarecrow of a woman who—with reason tottering—was rescued one hot shining day by an antiquated PBY? The answer lay far backward in another place and another time. To find it, we must go back...back... back....

FIRST TO the cold North Atlantic where the icebergs slip down from the polar regions—chip and crumble off the huge glaciers to float south

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and finally die in the warm currents streaming up from the Equator.

Back to a small, sea-going yacht plying those waters one overcast afternoon in a still, ominous sea. A yacht named R. X. Malling, for its owner.

R. X. Malling, capitalist, financier rock-jawed realist, stood beside the R. X. Malling's captain in the wheel house, staring out with morose disapproval at the heavy fog bank through which the yacht moved like a blind man on a crowded street.

The captain, a mild-mannered man named Peter Lamson, took a bull dog pipe from between his teeth and said, "I think it's going to lift."

Malling turned on him with a sneer. "You *think*! Why'd you get us into it in the first place?" He finished with a snort and went back to peering into thick fog.

The captain flushed and the stiffening of his jaw indicated his deliberate self-restraint. He'd about decided that the astronomical wages aboard the R. X. Malling were no longer compensating for the boorish abuse he had to endure. He had about decided this would be his last voyage. Thus had his decision prophesied truth. This was his last voyage. Within two hours he was dead.

"I have no control over the weather," he said coldly, "but I repeat—I think the fog will lift."

And as though to give the harassed captain a certain comfort, the fog began lifting at that moment. As the two men stood silently watching, the shroud of vapor thinned perceptibly overhead until it was only a bank lying on the water ahead.

"Probably a fluke," Malling grunted. "It'll settle down heavier than ever."

"I don't think so," Lamson replied. "The sun is breaking through. That's all we need."

"I thought you needed wind to blow it away. There isn't a breath of air stirring."

"The sun," Lamson said. "See—the bank is fading fast now."

This was true. In an amazingly short time, the fog became wispy nebulous strands floating away into nothingness. Everywhere, that was, except dead ahead, where a huge blob of the stuff hung on stubbornly. Then, as with the passing of a breath, the fog had vanished, the sun shone brightly. But the blob ahead did not disintegrate; rather, it coalesced and became defined.

Both men stared at it. R. X. Malling muttered, "Great God in Heaven!" Lamson said nothing. He was incapable of speech.

It was a great and wonderful craft, lying there motionless on the still water. Built like a huge tear drop, it was constructed of some shining sort of material that threw back the sun's rays from a gleaming spotless surface, hurting the eye with its brilliance.

"They've come at last!" Malling whispered in a choked, grating voice. "They've come at last."

Lamson turned a dazed face toward his employer; then, all speech stricken from his throat, he looked back at the sinister ship.

And sinister it was. The forward end tapered into a vicious looking snout tipped by a small black nostril which would quite obviously be the mouth of a cannon of some sort. It was not hard to visualize atomic death spouting from that nose.

Also, at intervals along the hull, other such weapons were in evidence.

"A fighting ship," Malling said, in a voice tight with fear.

"But where did it come from?" Lamson mouthed. "No ship yard on

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earth could—"

"From Mars, you fool! It's a space ship!" Then the contempt faded from his voice and it went retrospective as he repeated his former statement. "They've finally come."

The R. X. Malling's captain had recovered his composure somewhat. He licked his lips. "We've got to get away from here."

Malling turned contemptuous eyes upon him. "Stay where you are. It would be suicide to move an inch. We're right under her guns, you fool! They'd blow us out of the water."

The drawing back of Lamson's hand from the signal tube was an unconscious tribute to Malling's forceful personality. Lamson was far from a craven, but he was not the best of men to have around in emergencies even if he was a deep sea captain. After being subjected to a shock, it took Lamson a little time to get himself reassembled.

As it so happened, a signal below decks would have availed nothing. The entire crew of nine men, including officers, was crowded on the forward deck staring at the strange ship.

A few moments later, the door to the wheelhouse opened and two persons entered the narrow quarters; Felice Malling, the blonde, twenty-year-old wife of the financier, and the broad shouldered, good-looking first mate, Gregory Lewiston.

Lewiston's big hand lay somewhat possessively upon the girl's shoulder. As Malling looked up, the hand dropped away and Lewiston threw a smile with his salute. He spoke easily: "I prevailed on Mrs. Malling to come inside, sir. The weather is sharp."

As the girl was clad in a rich, gold-flecked dressing gown, this seemed a good idea; one which Malling could not resent. He grunted unintelligibly and drew his wife to his side. "Things look tough, honey," he growled.

Lewiston moved across the wheelhouse until he was standing beside Captain Lamson. "Any orders, sir?" he asked.

Lamson did not look at him but a quick, fleeting smile touched the captain's lips. "Can you think of any pertinent ones?"

The captain raised his arm and glanced at his watch. He was fast getting a hold on himself now and was again functioning like a captain. He frowned. "It's been almost ten minutes since we sighted her. Something should happen before long."

"Don't worry," Malling said grimly. "Something will happen soon enough."

There was an awkward silence lasting a full minute while the four of them stood watching the great tear-drop ship. Lamson was tapping nervous fingers against a spoke of the wheel. He turned to Lewiston. "You might go forward and try hailing her."

"Yes, sir," Lewiston said, touching his cap. A short time later he was on deck raising a megaphone to his lips. His deep voice could be heard: "Ahoy there! This is the R. X. Malling—out of Liverpool bound for New York! Please open up and identify yourself."

At sound of the words, Malling gave a short bitter laugh. "They'll identify themselves all right—with their forward guns." Then, as before, his voice went into retrospect: "If we can get out of this alive, there's an island in the Caribbean. My dad owned it. Stocked it up in '32."

Captain Lamson turned to him. "Sorry. I wasn't listening. What were you saying, sir?"

"Never mind." Then savagely: "Tell that ass to stop bellowing. Can't you see they're just laughing at us?"

Lewiston gave it up of his own

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accord and returned to the wheelhouse. "Might as well be hailing an iceberg, sir. It's no use. What do we do now?"

Lamson shrugged. "Nothing for the time being but wait. What else is there to do?"

So, for quite a long time, nothing was done. The crew moved uneasily about the deck, casting worried eyes now and again toward the wheelhouse as though recommending some sort of action. Lamson thought of sending them to their stations, then decided against it. If catastrophe struck suddenly, he felt they should have at least as much chance of survival as the topside officers. Yet, he hesitated to order them into life belts because the gesture would smack too much of inevitable defeat.

He glanced at his watch and gave ear, without appearing to, as Malling spoke in low tones to his beautiful young wife. "This is it," Malling was saying. "The beginning of the end. The start of an invasion from space. The earth has as much chance as a bug in a blast furnace."

"You think they mean to kill us, darling?" Felice asked.

"Of course they do."

Lewiston entered easily into the conversation. "Aren't you being a little pessimistic, sir? I know there has been quite a little talk about space and space ships, but mostly, I'm sure, by crackpots and the like. After all, we ourselves haven't even found a way to reach the moon yet." As Lewiston spoke, he could not keep his eyes from Felice Malling. They drifted toward her as naturally as water running down hill.

Malling evidently overlooked Lewiston's interest in his wife. "Crackpots, you say! Let me put you straight, mister, because I'm in a position to know. The possibility of ships from other planets reaching earth has been discussed pretty seriously by pretty smart men. Some of our top nuclear scientists and physicists have sat in on top-secret conferences over the thing. There are a set of master plans being drawn up right now on what to do if it happens. And mister, it has happened. What do you think that thing out there is —a duck?"

Lewiston brought his eyes back to Manning's face. "Of course not, but after all, it's only one ship. No matter what kind of weapons it has, even if it's hostile, which isn't proven, it can't conquer the world."

Malling studied him with the contempt he'd learned to pour out impartially where subordinates were concerned. "Your trouble, mister, is that you're like all the rest. You haven't the capacity of really big men to look ahead, to reason coming events from solid facts presented. You and your ilk have to have a gun barrel rammed down your throat before you'll concede that things are clouding up a little."

Lamson turned away to hide a slight smile. He had no love for his decidedly conceited first mate and didn't mind seeing him brought up short. Lewiston flushed. "But sir, isn't there such a thing as being overly nervous about things that—"

Malling barged right ahead, trampling Lewiston into silence with words. "You say only one ship. So you'd sit calmly by and wait until a thousand of them come jetting in behind that one. Then you might admit the truth, but I doubt it. And mark my words, mister, before you've had time to hunt a hole, there'll be a sky full of those things. And they'll be hostile, too. I know what I'm talking about."

Lewiston cast a quick fleeting glance at Felice Malling's well filled

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golden robe, and shrugged. "Well, even granting that, sir—what's the use of getting excited? There's nothing we can do about it, is there?"

"If we get away from here alive, there's something I can do, and you bet your life I'll do it."

"And there's something I'm going to do," Lamson said sharply. "I'm going to board that ship."

Malling's face darkened, "You'll do no such thing! You'll sit tight. I'm owner of this boat."

That last was most decidedly the wrong thing to say. The captain was mild-mannered and capable of taking a lot of abuse, but Malling had touched upon a principle. Lamson could not allow it to go unchallenged.

"Mr. Malling, you'll please remember that I'm captain here. Until we reach port, my word is law. Any complaints you have concerning my conduct will have to wait."

Malling was a bully, but not a fool. He knew men and his instincts told him he was now bucking a stone wall. "Very well. Let's hope you and I live to have a showdown."

"Let's hope so," Lamson said pleasantly. "Now, as to that craft. I've a strong hunch she's a derelict. Her continued silence is unnatural. I'll get the crew into a boat and we'll row over there and throw a rope over one of those gun barrels and see if we can pry open the door. A good strong crow-bar might do it."

"All right. As you say—you're the boss. But why the whole crew?"

Lamson surveyed the truculent Malling without apparent rancor, but he did not mince words. "I don't trust you, Mr. Malling. You don't like being crossed and I'm not sure just what you'd do if you had the opportunity. You're a very forceful man and you might prevail on the crew to sail away and leave me."

Malling's face turned positively venomous. "Do you really believe that?"

The captain probably did not believe it at all. Feeling the exhilaration of newly-asserted independence, he no doubt meant it merely as an insult. Nonetheless, he carried through. "I'll leave Lewiston here. He can sail the ship, of course, but I doubt if the two of you would be able to get under way in time to leave us stranded."

Malling, no longer able to trust himself, stormed out of the wheelhouse, leaving his beautiful young wife to eye the captain with distaste and say, "I think you're mean!"

Five minutes later, a crowded life boat was cutting the water between the R. X. Malling and the strange craft. Malling, his wife, and Lewiston stood on deck watching. They were silent, Malling gnawing viciously on a cold cigar, and Lewiston solicitous of Mrs. Malling to the extent of throwing his coat over her shoulders.

They saw the boat pull up beside the huge craft and they expected momentary action from within. But there was no action save that of making fast the rope ladder on the gun-snout and the subsequent labors of a husky sailor as he went to work on the door with a crow bar.

It was slow, discouraging work and seemed destined to fail. But, finally, the sailor got a leverage with the point of his bar braced in the narrow jam. He threw his weight on the bar. The door bulged at one point, then snapped open.

Immediately, Captain Lamson ordered the man back into the boat, climbed the rope himself, and disappeared into the ship.

He had evidently given previous orders because, after a few moments, his hand appeared in the dark open-

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ing; a quick, beckoning motion, and eight of the crew skinned up the ladder after him.

The next five minutes were like hours to those waiting outside. In the life boat below, the men took turns standing up to peer toward the open door. On the forward-deck of the R. X. Malling, Lewiston finally broke the silence: "What's he doing in there? Why doesn't he come out and tell us?"

Malling's smile was swift and cold. "Getting the jitters, Lewiston?"

The first mate shrugged. "I'm naturally curious."

Malling turned his head to throw a long, level look at Lewiston's profile. The first mate gave no sign of feeling Malling's eyes. Then, all attention was jerked back to the great shining craft.

Action—swift and terrible.

First, a strange sound from within —more like a huge and satisfied grunt than the repercussions of an explosion. It was as if the ship were really alive and had emitted an expression of anger. It shuddered from snout to tail fins, sending out ripples in the still water.

Then, two men came flying through the door.

They sailed out of the ship and over the sea exactly as a well-hit baseball flies from a bat; arced out across the water to touch twice like skipping stones before a final splash.

But this did not too long hold the eyes of the astonished three on the deck of the R. X. Malling. Their gaze returned again to the ship—to the electric blue fire that filled the doorway, spouting viciously outward.

The crew in the life-boat—frozen until this moment—now went frantically for the oars. It was too late. With the great and awful sound of tons of bacon frying in a giant pan, the ship melted away. That literally! In a matter of seconds, the hull reached a liquifying temperature and the water around it began to boil. Just as a great cloud of steam rose up to completely obscure the scene, the horrified three saw the craft separate along the center like gelatine and fan out in two directions to drop one of its white-hot sides like a flaming blanket over the life-boat and its luckless occupants.

Malling was—for once in his life —at a loss. He stared goggle-eyed at the great geyser of steam rising up from the sea. "Great God! It can't be! It just can't be!"

Lewiston showed more alertness. He rushed astern, hurled a life belt in the direction of the two figures struggling feebly beyond range of the boiling sea-water, and dived overboard. He approached the men with long powerful strokes, but he arrived in time to help only one. The survivor was going down for the final time when Lewiston seized his collar and laid him across the life belt.

Both Malling and his wife assisted in getting the man aboard. That was, until the girl got sick from the sight and staggered away. Then Lewiston and Malling got him on deck and Malling cried, "Good heavens—it's Captain Lamson—but you'd hardly know!"

Lamson's clothing had been burned off and his body broken from the violence. Yet, he was conscious and apparently wanted to talk even though it caused him great pain. He drew the two men down close, but directed his talk to Malling.

"You were right—right. They came only to kill. You should have seen them—such evil faces—never saw such concentrated evil before."

"What happened? Speak, man! Tell us."

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"All of them sitting and lying around—stone dead. Evil!"

"You said that. Go on!"

"Don't know. Saw one of my men pull a switch. Terrible blue heat from everywhere—explosion."

Lewiston looked up at Malling. "Must have been some device for destroying the ship in case of capture." Then to the fast-failing Lamson: "What sort of creatures were they? What did they look like?"

The captain's voice was a whisper now. "A little like us. But short—ugly. And evil as all the—blackest—sins." His throat worked as he strove to speak again. "Leave here—if you can—warn the world. If more of them come, they can only mean to kill."

His eyes closed and he stopped speaking. Malling looked up and shrugged. "We'll try and make him as comfortable as we can. Here, help me lift."

They put Lamson into his bunk and he held on for a time, his breath coming in great rasps. Then there were a few moments of complete comfort and lucidity. He looked up at Malling. "Guess we won't have that showdown after all."

Malling did not reply and Lamson's mind drifted on another track. "I'll bet the dumbest Martian would have known better than to pull that switch. But one of our men didn't."

Lamson smiled. Then he was dead.

AN HOUR later, after Lamson's body had been dropped into the sea, Lewiston hurried forward and found Malling and his young wife standing in the bow watching the last wisps of steam rising from the sea.

"The radio equipment has been wrecked, sir," Lewiston said.

"That's right," Malling said calmly. "I wrecked it."

Lewiston's eyes widened. "You—wrecked it! I don't quite understand."

"You might have been tempted to send an account of this affair into the ether. That would have been very foolish. So I broke up the equipment."

Malling laid a hand on Lewiston's shoulder. "I think it's time we had a little talk, boy. Come to my cabin."

Below, he poured Lewiston a glass of excellent wine. "The three of us are in a bad spot."

Lewiston agreed, and waited.

"Are you of the opinion that we can sail this boat, just the two of us?" Malling asked.

"The three of us. Mrs. Malling will have to help."

"You can chart a course?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'm going to give you a map. It's a section of the Caribbean. There's an island on it. I want you to set a course for that island."

"Isn't it about time you gave me the details?"

"I'll be glad to. It adds up to this, Lewiston. I'm scared stiff. Aren't you?"

"Not particularly."

"That's because you're like all the others—like Lamson. You can't look two feet ahead of your nose. Let me tell you a little story to illustrate what I mean."

Felice Malling was lying on a lounge nearby, one graceful arm thrown across her eyes. Lewiston's gaze fell on her, remained there as long as seemed prudent, then went back to Malling.

"It was in '32," Malling said, "when things were bad. My father was quite old then but his brain hadn't slipped any cogs. He had his fingers on the pulse of the situation and, like other smart men, he was prepared for the most logical eventuality."

"And what was that, sir?"

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"Revolution. The big boys weren't fooled any. They saw which way the wind was blowing and they prepared to protect themselves and their families. There was more than one boat steamed up and ready to leave at a moment's notice. And these boats were owned by the smart people, the able people, the boys who knew how to take care of themselves in a storm."

"That, I suppose, is where the island comes in."

"Right. My father bought this island from the British. Nothing much but a tip of coral poking up out of the sea pretty well off the trade routes. He had a house built there. The place has a small spring and he stocked it with food—enough to last a long, long time."

"But the depression blew over. There was no revolution."

"Certainly it blew over. By sheer luck more than anything else. But if trouble had come, my father wouldn't have suffered."

"And you feel trouble has come again?"

Malling leaned forward. "Beyond doubt. You think that ship is the only one due to arrive on earth? Well, that's what millions of others would think—the sheep who can't put facts together. The smart boys know differently. We can put facts together and we know what's going to happen." Malling tapped the first mate on the knee. "I tell you, boy—within a month—maybe two months— there'll be hundreds—thousands of those ships in the air. The lambs will be slaughtered; every civilized nation will be laid waste. Why, Attila and his Huns were babes in the woods beside what those Martians will be."

Lewiston considered. "Lamson seemed to think so—"

"And he saw them!"

"So you think we better head for this island of yours and see what happens?"

"We'll have a chance of not being found there. We'll have a chance to survive. And after all, that's the main thing."

"I guess you're right, sir. That is the main thing. But something still puzzles me. Why didn't you want to send out a report? Why did you wreck the radio?"

"You're really one of the lambs, aren't you?" Malling said with a slight sneer. "You'd sound off the first chance you got. But that's not the way to do it when it's every man for himself. And then, too, there's a certain public service involved in keeping quiet. As long as they've all got to die, why not let them enjoy the last few days of life? Why start a panic?"

"Your father, of course, didn't let anyone know he was set to get out from under?"

"You're damn right he didn't!"

Lewiston considered for a few moments in silence. When he spoke, it was to say, "You told me you had a map, sir."

LEWISTON laid out the course and took over command. The yacht was an oil burner and, as Lewiston said, quite simple to operate. "We'll be all right if we have good weather and nothing goes wrong mechanically. That's what we'll have to gamble on."

He and Malling spelled each other at the wheel, and Felice was given the job of watching various dials in the engine room and reporting changes to Lewiston. The weather held and the yacht plowed a south-southwest course, heading for an atom of coral in the vast ocean.

The days passed and the climate changed; the sea turned more blue each day and finally a school of dolphins was sighted off the bow. Lewis-

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ton lowered his glasses. "Sign of good luck," he said.

Malling, a week's growth of beard on his face, merely grunted. "How's Felice doing?" he asked.

"Fine. We wouldn't have been able to get along without her."

Malling grunted again and Lewiston turned his eyes toward the sky. "No ships yet."

"There will be."

Lewiston smiled. He was in a rare mood, his manner rich with good nature. "But suppose there aren't?" After all, your father said there would be a revolution and it never came. He was no doubt as positive as you are."

Malling writhed inwardly. He longed to put this upstart down, but the time was not yet. "Use your sense," he growled. "Do you think they built only one ship? A people so far advanced as to be able to come through space wouldn't do it piecemeal. The ships will come."

"I imagine you're right. I'm going below now to check the gauges. We should sight land by sunrise tomorrow."

Lewiston hit it almost on the nose. The sun was scarce over the horizon next day when Malling, at the wheel, spotted his crumb of coral dead ahead. He smiled a grim, terrible smile, switched the wheel to automatic, and went to his cabin.

From beneath his pillow he took a small, black .32 and went below. He found what he expected to find; his blonde Felice snug in the arms of handsome young Mr. Lewiston. Malling strove to hold in his screaming rage and did a good job of it.

"Please step apart, you two."

Lewiston jerked as though the .32 had already entered his back. Felice fled to the far wall and pressed herself hard against it as Lewiston—white faced—raised his arms.

Malling's smirk was one of complete triumph. "I think," he said to the first mate, "that your line should be: 'I can explain everything if you'll give me a chance.' Read your line, Lewiston!"

The first mate said nothing. This seemed to infuriate Malling. "You think I haven't seen what's been going on?" he roared. "Do you think I didn't know why you agreed to come here so readily? What kind of a blind fool do you take me for? You were looking ahead to a cozy clandestine vacation with my wife!"

Felice gasped, "Ralph—Ralph. Please!"

Malling said, "Shut up. We'll have no dramatics from you. I'd like to hear a word from your lover, however."

Lewiston's throat worked but no words came.

"Just plain yellow," Malling sneered. "With the chips down you're as yellow as butter."

"What do you plan to do?" Lewiston asked.

"What do you suppose I'm going to do? What do you think I've been wanting to do all the way down here, since the first night I caught up with you two?"

"You're not going to kill me in cold blood?"

"If I knew how to navigate a ship, you'd have been dead a week ago."

Then R. X. Malling shot Lewiston very carefully in the heart four times.

Felice Malling promptly fainted, whereupon her husband cursed impatiently, crossed the engine room and picked her up in his arms.

But he did not carry her far. After he had taken only a half dozen steps, the yacht rolled violently, hurling Malling to the floor. His head hit the steel plates and he was dazed for a moment as the sickening grind of

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steel against coral came into his ears.

Felice Malling moaned. Malling shook his head like a groggy fighter, got to his feet and helped his wife uphill toward the steel ladder. "What happened?" the girl moaned.

"We hit the goddam island—what else?"

They had hit the island indeed. Vagrant currents had swung the yacht around to bring it head-on into the reef-strewn, dangerous side, marked clearly on the map, and it now lay, decks awash, in a trough between two reefs, canted at a forty-five degree angle. Fifty yards of open water lay between the yacht and the shore.

"Plates ripped out," Malling said, "but I think we can make shore all right. I'll get one of those rubber boats from below."

They made the shore without much trouble and Malling, as soon as his feet touched dry coral, looked up into the sky and said, "Come on now, you bastards! Come by the thousands. You've got a fat chance of finding me here."

To his cowering wife, he appeared to have developed a mania relative to ships from Mars; an unhealthy frame of mind that bordered on insanity. But she said nothing. Her thoughts were entirely concerned with her own coming punishment.

But, strangely, there was none. Malling, from that day on, never mentioned Lewiston or the girl's marital treachery. They found the stores in a cellar hewn into solid coral under the house. They were still in excellent condition. The spring was functioning; all was well.

Two nights later, a swift tropical storm came out of the southeast and raged until sunrise. When it finally spent itself, there were only a few scattered pieces of the R. X. Malling still visible in the pitching water. By the following day, even these scraps of wreckage were gone.

The Mallings settled down to life on a desert island and for a time it went well. With only each other, they managed to get along quite nicely. They carried on a running gin rummy game after six months of which Felice owed Malling one hundred and eighteen thousand dollars.

A short time later, while they walked together on the bright coral beach, Malling stopped in his tracks. A peculiar vacant look filled his eyes.

"I don't feel good," he said. He went to his knees and then slumped over. He never spoke again, so swift was the lethal heart attack.

After that, Felice Malling lost the greater part of her mind.

Then the rescuing PBY.

THE SPACE SHIP was not Martian, as Malling had thought. It was one of two craft which had spanned the void from Venus; seeking—as Malling had been sure—the locations of plunder on other planets. The ships were good sturdy craft in which the temperature was kept at a normal hundred and fifteen degrees. Normal, that is, for Venusians.

They circled the planet three times, after which the two captains went into conference via radio. Their conversation, in words we can understand, went as follows:

"A cold planet."

"Beyond doubt."

"Practically uninhabited."

"Check."

"Pretty much a waste of our time."

"You said it."

"Haven't spotted anything remotely resembling a city."

"Neither have I."

"Baby— I'll bet it's cold down there."

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"You ain't fooling."

"Let's head for home. Report—negative."

"They won't like it. Five hundred ships waiting for the word to jet off."

"It's not our fault."

"Nope—not our fault."

But trouble was waiting up around the top end of the planet where the ships circled low over the vast ice and snow range for a last look.

One of the captains signalled the other: "Trouble. We're tangled up with some sort of magnetic field below. Our own fields are conking out."

"Then I better get the hell out of here."

"But we're being pulled down. We've got to make a landing."

"That's too bad."

"Stand by to land with me and pick us up."

"Don't be silly. You think I want to get stranded down there?"

"Wait a minute. You can't—"

"Like hell I can't. Goodbye, sweetheart."

One of the ships spiralled away into space. The other settled down to the bosom of the ageless polar snows and made a rather creditable landing. But as the great shell touched, the captain knew it would never rise again. A mountain range some four miles ahead definitely barred the way.

But the ship could not have even tried to jet off because the mechanism, involved with the forces of the north magnetic pole, was completely hashed up.

Swiftly the temperature dropped inside the huge shell. Slower and slower the Venusians moved about. Their mental processes became more sluggish by the minute until very few of them were either moving or thinking. Finally, the last Venusian sat down in a chair to rest himself. He never got up.

When the temperature reached eighty degrees above zero, they were all dead. At zero, they were pretty well frozen. Finally at seventy-five below, you could have chipped away their bodies in small, bullet-like pieces.

The ship sat where it was for five years. Then the arctic again heaved up within itself—a fissure opened, and the ship slid gently down a long incline into a crevasse. In time, the ice closed over it—sealed it in a tomb over half a mile deep.

Now, the whole area began moving south. During the first year, it moved seven and one half inches. The second year found it a foot nearer the equator. It made splendid progress for quite a while until it came up against a rock ridge anchored deep in mother earth. The ship stayed there.

Until the land heaved again with great internal convulsions and lifted the ship over the submerged mountain ridge. Again it moved southward.

Finally it got down to where the ice broke away in huge bergs to float down and blend with the open sea. The space ship floated down also toward a final rendezvous with the blue fire of self-destruction after which it also mixed with the ocean.

That's all there was to it. Nothing of any great importance, but possibly the time cycles are of interest.

It was well over one hundred and fifty thousand years from the time the ship made its forced landing to the moment it was consumed by the blue fire.

And a little more than four years later, an old PBY found a demented woman on a coral island in the Caribbean.

A woman who asked, "Did the ships ever come?"

THE END

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READER'S PAGE

THE DICKENS YOU SAY!

Dear Editor:

The May '51 ish of *FA* will be one that I'll remember for a long time to come. Undoubtedly this has been the greatest quality issue of your 'zine to date, and I have been a reader of it for some ten years, practically since its inception.

The most best greatest wonderful—and other superlatives—stories that I know to appear in *FA* were in this issue, and the best yarns in the issue were: "Invasion From The Deep" by Fairman; "The Eye Of Tandyla" by de Camp; and "Make Room For Me!" by Ted Sturgeon. In all fairness to the writers for their brilliant display of writing talent, I cannot play favorites with any of those three stories—suffice it to say that they were all three of the best.

However, McGivern's "Fix Me Something To Eat" and Ray Jones' "...As Others See Us" are very close seconds. In short, a really top-notch issue.

Finlay's artistic efforts also played a major role in enhancing the value of the contents, but unfortunately the inking was too inferior to bring the shades and delicacies of the famous artist's hand into the limelight.

As a matter of fact, inking and printing has been in the doldrums for some time. This should not be overlooked since, aside from promoting astigmatism and various forms of optic irritations, it ain't very pretty. Something should be done about having either a better quality, unblotter-like paper (this could be the reason for fuzziness in the illustrations) in the general format, or uniform edges on all corners or, best of all, both.

As for *AMAZING*, it's been a most moribund magazine ever since the ejection of Dick Shaver's stories and the mystery.

Putting *FA* and *AS* next to each other, it would be hard for one to believe that both periodicals are still being published by one outfit. Why this is so, is a matter of conjecture best left to posterity for further analysis.

I note that in many letters, the readers of *FA* hint or inquire as to where or how they might go about securing back issues; ergo, I have several scores of duplicates, and dozens of others from my collection I seek to dispose of, with around a thousand or more other stfantasy mags, and also books, that must go, either through barter or sale—preferably for swap. I will consider all offers and answer each card and letter sent to me, as is my habit. Like in so many such offers, it's mostly a matter of first come first served.

As I have a habit of reading the Reader's Page first on buying a copy of *FA*, I find this the most interesting steady feature you have. If I may make a suggestion, it would be more to the interest of subscribers and steady readers alike if all other steady miscellany were omitted for the sake of having a longer letter column in each issue. I know for a fact that an extraordinary letter section has often been the reason for hundreds of fans buying or subscribing to a magazine.

The dickens with what others say about your cover illustrations! They are the most colorful and best done in the s-f field.

Calvin Thos. Beck
American Science-Fantasy Society
7312 Blvd. East
North Bergen, N. J.

Well, Mr. Beck, you've got your "better quality, unblotter-like paper" now in both of the Ziff-Davis science-fiction magazines. This is an improvement in the reproduction of both type and illustrations—something we've been trying to get for our readers for a long time. .....Ed.

PET PEEVE: FINLAY

Dear Sir:

When I purchase my *FANTASTIC* and *AMAZING* each month, I always skim through the illustrations before settling down and reading each mag from cover to cover—ads included.

When I flipped the May *FANTASTIC* open, I thought sure I had accidentally picked up one of those *WONDER* or *PLANET STORY* mags. It seemed that every page I turned to had one of those horrible illustrations by Virgil Finlay. Try it yourself. See if the pages don't seem to automatically open to those 1*/-*% illustrations.

If I hadn't been reading your two mags for years—my collection is complete back to 1943—I would be buying one less s-f mag.

If you must continue to have Virgil

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Finlay's illustrations, please print them on the back of the sheet on which you print those science notes. That way I can tear out those pages and paste them in a scrap book—illustration down, of course.

Well, I'll be darned. There's one in *AMAZING* too! This is almost too much to bear.

I have been an avid reader of your two mags ever since I was given one back in '43. I can't say I've been an active s-f fan or even that I have written one single letter to the editor expressing my appreciation for the wonderful entertainment standards he maintained, but nevertheless I haven't missed a copy and I've even—on special occasions—loaned out a copy or two of my collection.

This Finlay business may make me an active s-f fan. I have more than half a notion to organize an "anti-Finlay" club with the aim of relegating Finlay to the lower class s-f mags from whence he came.

If you must have V. F.'s illustrations, *please, please* confine them to one issue and make it all Finlay pics and Finlay-based stories. That way I can file the issue in my collection without having to do more than learn it is the Finlay issue.

I certainly hope you won't judge me too severely because of what I have written so far. I just plain despise illustrations of that type. End brickbats.

Begin roses. I suppose the illustration pages 48 & 49 is by your new man Gerald Hohns. Why doesn't he sign his work, or do I need a magnifying glass?

The above-mentioned illustration and the one by my favorite, Henry Sharp, were like an oasis.

Do you happen to know of any way I could obtain copies of your mags from way back? It makes me sad to think of all the good reading I have missed. Too bad you don't come out more often!

Incidentally, I bought and mailed two extra copies of your mags to Sgt. P. V. Catino. He's the one in the Editor's Notebook in the April *FANTASTIC*. Sent them a couple of weeks ago, so I suppose he will be getting them any time now.

It would be interesting to learn how many people sent him copies! How about a report on it in some forthcoming issue? He will surely let you know how well his letter went over as far as getting him old and new copies is concerned!

Please don't be influenced by people writing to you telling you they prefer weird stories and that they don't like space-travel stories or vice-versa! Keep on mixing them as you have in the past and keep us all happy. We will buy every copy if we know we will find a fair share of our own particular kind of story therein. Don't ever forget that and your circulation will continue to climb every time anybody picks up his first copy and looks through it!

As far as the covers are concerned, I say, "Keep the gals on them!" It would be nice to see you come out with pictures on the back again. I can well imagine that the price you receive for that back page ad amounts to more than I earn in a week, so I won't hold my breath until you come out with the back page made up in an illustration you had to pay for!

C. L. Disbrow
233 South Duluth Avenue
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

SEX—OR SEXGESTIVE?

Dear Ed:

It's high time someone from Kentucky, land of fast women and beautiful horses, said something as a fan. I've never seen a letter in any mag, any time, from *Ky.* except mebbe Russ Watkins blowing his and DAWN'S horns.

It's a darn shame I have to introduce us this way, but things are tough all over, and I feel I should say something about the lead story in the April ish of *FA*. Stories like "The Devil With You" and a few others are OK. I enjoyed TDWY immensely.

I'm a heckuva long way from being an old fogey, too, but this's beyond that. I refer to "Nine Worlds West" by Glee Garson. This thing wasn't suggestive; it was much beyond that! Sex in stories is all right, as long as the author doesn't go nuts. Garson did. When I read it, I couldn't help thinking of all the girls who were reading it, too. We'll make no bones about this—I'm what is commonly referred to as a teen-ager, being sixteen. But I was shocked with NWW. I was glad to see MacCauley didn't stick to the story—he put clothes on her. I'll bet that's the first time in the history of stf that an artist put more clothes on the girl in his pic than was specified in the story.

I know that *AS* and *FA* are two of the few mags who don't think sex should be avoided. That's silly (avoiding it, I mean). I've always liked your pair—probably always will. I do think, however, that stuff like "Nine Worlds West" could be left out. Pretty bad.

In the second place, it was written poorly. There are a lot of mistakes in spelling and grammatical errors galore. I'd like to give an example of one particular paragraph: Page 11, paragraph five. I quote: "She had a tanned, flawless complexion. Her long legs clad (no comma there) in skin-tight space-pants were lush and perfect. She had as beautiful a body as Cort had ever seen." Two she had's.

How about: "He jerked the cold towel off his head and dropped it to the floor, regarding the girl with frankly appraising eyes. Her complexion was one to be admired by any society woman back on Earth; well-tanned, flawless. He admired her lush, perfectly-molded legs, illy concealed in skin-tight space-trousers (never

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liked the word "pants"). Hers was as beautiful a body as Cort had ever seen or, for that matter, ever hoped to see."

Well, before you get an inferiority complex and I burst a blood-vessel, let's look at the rest of the issue. Everything else was good—exceptionally so. Although the last of "The Children" could be foreseen, it was an excellent story. Phillips turned up with a brand new fantasy idea and made the best of it, even to a horrific ending. Jarvis scared the trousers (I don't like pants, remember) off anyone who was home by themselves.

"Some Do It With A Look"—I liked that title, although Kohn shouldn't have drawn the illustration he did; it took away the suspense which would have been there at the beginning. Complete with fantasy, scares, and a very cute ending. Then there was "Favors Can Be Fatal" to break the monotony. A space-opry with the old valuable asteroid idea, but a brand new twist. That was a mighty quick marriage, though. Could it've been on account of all that dough the girl got?

Then you gypped us by slicing into the letters. Lessee, I can't help Gertrude Whittum; my reading of stf doesn't date back that far. I agree pretty much with Richard Dickey, and sincerely with Gerry de la Ree—about long novels, I mean. Oh, and I heartily agree with Mr. Aldrich, too, about all the names we have to put up with. My pet peeve is "This is Cubeguber Lorro Dorn, Sufferinsuccotash of Abadabadabab." If Cubeguber means "King" and Sufferinsuccotash means "High Potentate" why not call 'em that? The rest of the story is translated. Hey, there's a brilliant idea. I'll devise a new language, write a story in it, and let you and the readers figger it out. Me'n L. S. de Camp and Hulbert Burroughs! I dunno what to say about Laura Hills' letter about creeping Martians except "Lemme outa here." I'll be back when L. Sprague de Camp appears.

A. J. Offutt, Jr.
Taylorsville, Kentucky

P. S. I am sincere about "Nine Worlds West" though. Tell Garson to go have a few words with his pastor.

NO NAME

Dear Ed,

Before I forget the name again, the story that Gertrude Whittum of Springfield, Mass. is looking for might possibly be "Heart of Gold" which I believe appeared in one of the Ziff-Davis mags three or four years ago. The plot is similar, but the ending was happier—one of the best love stories I have ever read, to be honest. That is why I remember it. Something about it just made me feel good all over.

Wonderful editorial. Am going to send some of my old magazines to them. I have only about six months' collection left, as I gave all the old ones to some MIT student last fall sometime—filled the back seat of his car and the floor in front of it!

Oh yes, the magazine all this is in is *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* for April '51.

The best stories to my way of thinking were: "Nine Worlds West" and "The Children." "Favors Can Be Fatal" runs second to these. The others I didn't care for—too morbid for my taste.

I think—from the letters I've read in your columns—that certain peoples are trying to justify their own acts and desires, by decrying all forms of art that employ nude or semi-nude females, although they don't dare to be quite so vociferous in regard to the classical and accepted paintings that have received the praises of the critics.

Personally, there is nothing in this world that I consider as beautiful as a well conceived and executed nude painting or drawing of the female figure. The only thing I'm very much against is the half undressed suggestive pictures so prevalent in certain types of magazines. It is neither honest nor art.

In science-fiction, we have an odd condition with regard to nude females. In the past, it has seemed as if the nude or scantily clad female was a necessity regardless of time or circumstances, so that you have a cover picture showing a girl practically or completely nude, accompanied by one or more men who are completely encased in a space suit, helmet and all.

Under these circumstances, it necessarily follows that the girl is either frozen stiff or cooked to a frazzle (depending on your conception of conditions in space) but in either case certainly done for in this life. A well-developed male figure is also a thing of beauty, especially to the female sex, so why not show both in like conditions? I certainly don't envy the men of the future if they have to wear all those harnesses and clothes in temperatures that allow the women to be most scantily clad!

It is a pleasure to have an old woman of twenty-seven come out and admit that she finds such nudes or near nudes not unpleasant. I refer to the letter by Velma Balber from Chicago. Of course, I am ten years her senior so that I qualify as an old fogie!

Anyway, I like FA very much and never miss an issue. By the way, what happened to FA? It seems that AMAZING is a month ahead of you now!

Emory H. Mann
R.F.D. No. 1
West Townsend, Mass.

Teen-ager, middle-ager, or "old fogie"—everybody's opinion is welcome here. AMAZING STORIES comes out about a

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week and a half before FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. Thus, for the August issues, AMAZING went on sale June 8, while FANTASTIC hit the newsstands June 19. ..... Ed.

FROM ACROSS THE SEA

Dear Editor,

I am writing this to tell you of my appreciation of *FA*, also *AS*. I think that they are two of the best magazines on the bookstands (in their own class).

I did not know what I was missing until I happened to buy one out of curiosity some time ago, and from then on I have been a keen fan. I buy the British edition which is published over here.

Also, I would be very glad if you could clear up one or two points. How is it that in *FA* British edition No. 3 (all about The Dream World) i.e. "The Mental Assassin" you say next month's issue features a Toffee story. Yet, when British edition No. 4 came out, not a Toffee story did I see—only "Warrior Queen of Mars." Although I now have 7 issues of FA, I can't see a single Toffee story in them.

Now, to get back to what I wanted to say about the stories. I thought "The Mental Assassins" was very good. I also agree with Ralph Bailey about the cover girl in green in the grasp of a flower. But where does anything like that happen in the story? The rest of the stories were good—all except "Spawn of Darkness" which was too good for words. Also "The Elementals of Jaedar."

"The Warrior Queen of Mars" was quite good, but for the best issue of the lot give me "The Masters of Sleep." This brings me up to say, how about a bit more fantasy stories instead of s-f.

Also in the Notebook of *FA*, British issue No. 6 ("The Devil With You"—which I did not think much of) you say you've just scheduled "Slaves of Sleep." Yet "Slaves of Sleep" appeared in British issue No. 5 in January 1951, whereas "The Devil With You" was in February. A bit lopsided, don't you think?

And another thing, are there supposed to be any reader's letters in *AS*? Because if so, I can't see any.

I also agree with Naomi Holly who wants more fantasy of the occult and astrology. I would like to hear from any readers who have any back issues of FA or *AS* that they wish to sell or exchange, so that we can come to terms. There is one thing I disagree with Naomi Holly about, and that is the letter. What is the point of knowing what readers do? It is much better to know what they think of the stories, etc.

Leonard Gleicher
1 Tenterden Gdns.
London, N. W. 4
England

In getting the British editions of FA set up, there were various bugs that had to be ironed out. In consequence, certain issues skipped being reprinted. This is what must have happened with the issue containing the Toffee story. The readers' page in AS suffered the same fate. Everything is in working order now—and from now on you should get exact duplication. ..... Ed.

SF FANS—NOTE....

Dear Editor:

I have been an avid reader of science-fiction for sixteen years or more. I guess I could say a lot more than sixteen, as I can remember an illustration from a very old story, and I wondered if the other readers could help me in finding the title.

From what I can remember of the story, a man invented a machine that was able to bore its way through the ground. In the illustration that I remember, the machine has come up in a cellar, or an underground room. It is at an angle to the floor imbedded in a wall of the room. Standing beside the machine is the man, with his right arm raised, and holding a small drop-shaped object. The story states that this is nothing more than an old fashioned light bulb. The other figures in the picture are, I believe, one standing in the far right corner; and two sitting at a table along the right wall. One man is facing the reader, while the other is facing the man from the machine. The caption says that they are afraid that he is going to throw the bulb which they think is a bomb.

The magazine that had this story may have been *AMAZING*, *ASTOUNDING*, ASTONISHING, or some other science-fiction magazine that began with A.

As near as I can recall, I read this story about 22 years ago, when I was about 7 years old.

I just finished the April issue and read the letter by Gertrude Whittum. I can recall very faintly reading that story, but I'm afraid I cannot be of help to Miss Whittum, but I wonder if someone could be of help to me?

This is my first letter to a magazine of any kind, and a criticism of the cover and cover story prompted me to write.

My one and only criticism is the three-way mixup, in my opinion, of the cover, the cover story title, and the story itself. The world in the story is not a world of flame, as the only flame mentioned was in the pool and that seemed to me to be as a multicolored fluorescence as seen on the oceans, only much brighter. The cover picture seems to show her being thrown, instead of jumping, into the pool. The "pool" being shown as flame instead of water, which it is in the story.

As for the title, I get the connection. But I think a better matching one could have been found. How about "Hagerty's Planet?" Even though I did criticize the cover story, I rate it first in this issue. Here are my ratings for this month:

(1) "Nine Worlds West".
(2) "A Matter of Principle". Good, but

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why not take it a little further and see how she reacted to her new-old husband?

(3) "In What Dark Mind". Good. That ending statement really gave a shock to the reader. It did to me, at least.

(4) "The Children". No comment.

(5) "Favors Can Be Fatal". Fair. Seemed rather juvenile to me, in that the hero, in trouble, helps beautiful girl, finds a fortune, everything turns out all to his favor and they live happily ever after.

(6) "Some Do It With a Look". N. C.

I live in a small town in western Pennsylvania. I have never heard of any other s-f fans in my neighborhood, and so I would like to correspond with anyone who is interested in writing. My hobbies are reading, drawing, stamp collecting.

I hope you will print my letter, as I do like to write and would like to get in touch with other s-f fans.

George E. Dold
Box 46
Langeloth, Pa.

TIME TO RETIRE, HE SAYS

Dear Editor:

I finally got around to reading FA again, after letting the first five 1951 issues pile up unread. I got around to them and finished them in one fell swoop.

It seems that the tone of the magazine has swung back to science-fiction again, and for a while it looked like the story quality had gone back to the old days before 1951. But lately you've been picking up.

Robert Gibson Jones, Robert Moore Williams and Roger Graham have all been doing too much. These three gents should be retired on pension for a month or so. They've worn themselves out raking in the moolah. I haven't been able to read any of Williams' yarns in nearly a year. And Roger's sequel to "Face Beyond the Veil" was abominable—an all-time low for him.

The May 1951 issue, though, showed the way back. You need long stories. Not too long, because you don't have many pages, alas. But 30,000 should be a minimum length for the feature story. Fairman's novel wasn't very good, but it was readable, though reminiscent of the war years in FA. I do hope that you won't run stories showing North Koreans menacing honest clean young soldiers, or having all sorts of devils come to get Mao-tse-tsung. It's nice to be patriotic, but crud like that is just hysterical—like in the first World War when sauerkraut became liberty kraut. Silly.

And if you'll undertake to poke through your back files, you'll be astounded—no, amazed—at the percentage of war stories in your mags! I hope that this new conflict won't start that all over again.

The appearance of Sturgeon and de Camp in one issue meant an automatic "buy" for me. Finlay and Raymond Jones are good drawing cards, too. It's too bad that you tend more to having "house authors" who meet deadlines and contribute huge amounts. McGivern, Graham and Williams are the chief offenders. Why not buy from Leiber, de Camp, Sturgeon, St. Reynard more often?

I notice that your regular letter hacks—Mort Paley, Paul Ganley, Earl Newlin, and some others, including myself—haven't been represented in your pages lately. I'm a bit rusty at letterhacking, but I'd like to get back into the swing of letter writing again.

And would it be stretching things if I inserted a brief plug for my fanzine, SPACESHIP, which is now in its third year of publication? 24 or more pages every issue, and the price is only a dime.

Thanks for listening, and I think you'll be able to pick up right where your very capable predecessor left off.

Bob Silverberg
760 Montgomery Street
Brooklyn 13, N. Y.

Thanks, Bob—we're trying—and will do everything we can to make you continue feeling this way. .....Ed.

FA'S THE ONE FOR ME....

Dear Editor:

Being just an "off-and-on" reader of s-f, I have not before this written a letter to the editor, but during the last three years I have sampled about every s-f magazine obtainable, and I have come to the conclusion, all things considered, that *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* is the one for me.

I stop at a newsstand about once a month for an s-f mag, which once I started to read became a habit. I hate to have to skim through every story in each mag each month to find the mag with a majority of interesting stories. This is very time-consuming, and often I am disappointed when I get home and start reading.

I have found that, with *FA*, not only do I enjoy all the stories, but I get a better idea of what to expect from your story titles and short resumes on the contents page. Other mags are either too vague or sensational in their "catch lines". The word lengths of the stories on your contents page is appreciated too.

Now for my analysis of *FA*: The cover art is excellent. Inside illos good. Stories excellent with few exceptions, so there is no use to try to rate individual stories. As far as I'm concerned, you could leave out the features (excepting "The Editor's Notebook" and "Reader's Page" of course) and substitute another "Short".

I have noticed over a period of time that many of your readers have suggested "better paper," "trimmed edges," etc. for "quality appearance." I think your mag is OK as is. Sure, it would be nice to pick up a smooth-edged, glossy-paged *FANTASTIC*. I would heartily approve such an improvement, but there would probably have to be a sacrifice somewhere else. Keep

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up your good quality art and stories, and don't sacrifice them for "quality appearance".

I would appreciate more stories based on paraphysics—telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, etc. Also stories featuring the problem of humanoids.

Pardon my ignorance, but what does "stf" stand for? "S-F" is obviously science-fiction; is "stf" a variant?

Leon I. Maxson, Jr.
2207 Spain Street
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

S-F stands for science fiction; while STF is just a variation meaning scientific fiction. .....Ed.

WHO CAN HELP LIL?

Dear Editor:

I am very glad to see that *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* and *AMAZING STORIES* are now on sale in Canada. I was fortunate enough to have a pal in the States send me her back issues and I looked forward to getting them impatiently. Now, I can get them every month or so. I don't know which I like the best, but I do know that they are tops in their field.

Now I have a favor to ask! I would appreciate it greatly if you would print this plea. If any of your readers has a copy of H. Rider Haggard's story "She" or "The Return of She" in either book or magazine form for sale, would they please let me know, informing me of the price they want for it? I've been trying for years to get a copy of these stories, but so far have been unsuccessful.

Thanking you and wishing you every success with future issues.

Lillian Ray
Box 451
Windsor, N. S.
Canada

CRITICISM—OR PRAISE?

Gentlemen:

This is my second missive to you in the eight years since I first discovered *FA*.

I must admit that I have never been displeased with any issue during that period. My explanation for the foregoing statement is simply that I read for "pleasure".

Many of your regular readers should bear that in mind. It's perfectly all right to criticize and pick the stories apart—providing you're qualified to do so.

I realize that everyone has his own opinions—but some are better left unsaid. Too many of your fans must consider themselves budding writers or something to that effect.

Considering other items: (1) Your covers, for example. I agree with that small portion of your fans who liked your undressed covers; they were not obscene. Obscenity is a state of mind—in my estimation.

(2) Science-fiction versus fantasy and the weird. I must echo the sentiments of one J. Hintz of Jamaica, Long Island. I am in favor of more stories in the pure fantasy or weird vein, such as "The Dark Balcony" by Emil Petaja—wonderfully weird.

(3) Your artists! (A) Robert Gibson Jones. This boy's covers are magnificent 98 per cent of the time; the other two per cent merely fabulous.

(B) James B. Settles—I miss this fellow on covers. I think he's a wonderful artist.

Again I must agree with a portion of your other fans on the selection of Finlay and Bok—especially Bok for covers.

Well, I feel I've "worn out my welcome" so to speak. Keep up the wonderful work.

Mr. James L. Cribelar
1140 N. Alton Avenue
Indianapolis 22, Indiana

ACCURACY VS. PLOT

Dear L. E.

There are several reasons why I'm writing this. One is that the latest FA (May) was exceptionally good. Another is the Fairman story that made it so good. Also the cover had something to do with it. But most important was the panning of "Rocketship X-M" by Anthony Van Riper.

Mr. Van Riper claimed that: (1) Mr. Hamling had said that boy-meets-girl is more important than scientific accuracy, and (2) technical excellence is more important than "plot".

Point (1) can be proved wrong. If Mr. Van Riper will refer to the editorial, he will find: "We compared it ('Destination Moon') to 'Rocketship X-M'. We thought it lacked what 'Rocketship X-M' had—a story. Similarly, of course, it contained much that 'Rocketship X-M' did not—from the technical side." He said nothing about boy-meets-girl, which certainly *isn't* a plot. As for accuracy vs. plot, my opinion is this: Plot is certainly more important than accuracy. Certainly there should be some accuracy (*no more Flash Gordon hacks, please*) but don't sacrifice plot just for accuracy. What's more, I think fandom is with me. How about it, gang? Not only will it make a more interesting Reader's Page, it will give the Hollywood big shots an idea of what we want.

The second reason for writing was "Invasion From the Deep." This story was the best you've published since St. Reynard's "Mistress of the Djinn" (November, 1950, FA). This story really calls for a sequel—and at least 35,000 words this time. Fairman writes all too little stf anyway. Outside of "Invasion" I've only read two shorts by him—both good. They were "No Teeth For The Tiger" (Feb. 1950 *AMAZING*) and "The Broken Doll" (July 1950 *FA*). The more stories of his you print, the better I'll like it.

The cover was worthy of the story which is saying something. I like it even better than the April *AS* which I praised in no uncertain terms. Llanni wasn't drawn

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exactly as described (she had horns and blonde hair in the story) but it was still good. Another case where accuracy takes the back seat. As to your cover policy, print any kind of cover you want. Just as long as it's good of its type.

The supporting card was fair, better than usual for FA. They rank as follows:

"As Others See You" by Jones. Fairly good. Second.

"The Eye of Tandyla." Third. Funny in spots but not up to De Camp's usual standard.

"Make Room for Me" by Sturgeon. Fourth.

"Fix Me Something to Eat" by McGivern. Fifth. I don't like weird stuff.

The artwork was very much improved with the best Finlay—page 66. And the number of fillers has been cut down (Hurrah). Veddy fine issue.

James Lynch
2630 Penn Avenue, No.
Minneapolis, Minn.

The most accurate story in the world, unless it presents an interesting human problem, is worthless. In writing fiction, plot is of paramount importance, with accuracy one of the important trimmings.

We agree with you regarding Paul Fairman's talents—and you'll be seeing more and more of him in the pages of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and AMAZING STORIES. ..... Ed.

LET'S FIGHT!

Dear Ed:

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I glimpsed the contents page of FA. You're really getting on the ball now. First time out for Jones in your pages, isn't it? Fairman sounds like a house name. Well?

The May cover, though one of those hateful symbolic things, was passable. Why don't you use some real fantasy for your cover? Oh well...

"Invasion From The Deep" was highly entertaining. Rather short, though. Ted Sturgeon's story was fine, with de Camp's effort copping a third. The other two were in the "also ran" class. Do you have anything else by de Camp coming up? He is quite good.

The Reader's Page: Ah, for lo these many issues *FA* has been lacking a feud. Methinks Mr. Martello has done admirably towards starting one. I will herewith shove my two-bits worth in. It is absurd in the first place to ask a question like that. It is even more ridiculous to attempt to answer it. It would be unfair to every author in the field. Does Mr. Martello think it's fair to compare, say Bradbury to Taine? Of course not! The relationship between the two is about as close as the North Pole is to the South Pole. There is no fair comparison the way Mr. Martello attempts it. Well, that about does it for the nonce.

Jan Romanoff
26601 So. Western
Lomita, California

Oh my, no. Paul Fairman's a very much alive and kicking author who's right up there with the best of them. .....Ed.

A PAT ON THE BACK

Dear Editor:

The question posed by L. L. Martello in the May issue is so broad that it may well go unanswered even after the votes are all in. Even should the final returns show a clear majority for some one writer, there will be a lot of dissenting opinions, people and fans especially being what they are. It's a matter of taste, purely.

To give merely one's own opinion of the greatest living science-fiction writer is quite a task. After much scratching I came up with ten names: Clifford D. Simak, C. M. Kornbluth, Fritz Leiber, Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Fredric Brown, Robert A. Heinlein, Henry Kuttner, and Theodore Sturgeon. There is absolutely no order in this arrangement. To call any one of the foregoing writers *the* best would be to insult the others. Each is a master.

These are by no means the only authors whose stories I enjoy. John D. MacDonald, Richard Matheson, and Frank M. Robinson almost made the list. Murray Leinster, Arthur C. Clarke, Raymond F. Jones, Katherine MacLean, Eric Frank Russell, Walt Sheldon, James H. Schmitz are all excellent. Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton, for their own peculiar style, and your own Geoff St. Reynard, should be mentioned—but this could go on for pages.

I doubt that I've covered half of the writers who will be named as "best". But I think most of your readers will agree that those I've noted are a formidable lot. Here's one reader who would be interested in the results of this informal poll.

I hate to destroy the organization of this letter, but there have been so many comments on Leiber's "You're All Alone" and Bloch's "The Devil With You", that I'm burning to read them. Anybody want to sell those issues? I'd also like to get hold of the December '50 *FA* containing del Rey's Norse gods story, "When the World Tottered".

A pat on the back to make this worth your while—*FANTASTIC* is printing much better material than many of the magazines now on the stands. Keep up your parade of fine lead novels.

Richard W. Ryan
224 Broad Street
Newark, Ohio

Thanks much, Dick, for the nice words. And what have the rest of you readers got to say about Dick's listings? .....Ed.

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A WAR OF NERVES

By Jonathon Peterson

Will the last living entity on Earth be Man—or Insect? From time immemorial, Man has been waging this battle—but now . . . ?

IT IS COMMON knowledge that even the military laboratories produce items useful to the peace-lover. When the bugles cease blowing, the armorers beat the swords back into plowshares. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the laboratories of our own country. A superb example of this is the amazing work now being done with the "so-called nerve gases" developed both in Germany and here during the Second World War.

The "nerve gases" were complex offshoots of certain organic phosphate compounds, terribly potent and capable of tremendous damage to the human organism. But with the coming of peace (such as it is), the scientists have applied these dreadful and lethal invisible weapons against an enemy more deadly to Man than Man—namely the insects.

Widespread use is being made of these chemicals in attacking the insect pests which drive farmers to distraction. These powerful irritants have the property of penetrating and destroying the shells and chitinous armor of almost any kind of insect. Farmers are using the derivatives of the former nerve gases widely. But, unfortunately, in the zeal to apply these magic weapons, many have forgotten the original intent of the gaseous agents, which was to attack human organisms. The result is that many people have died by the simple error of their own making—not taking adequate preventive measures against their very own weapons. Masks and clothing of poor quality or of material design totally unrelated to the gases themselves, have permitted scores of persons to die and to be injured by the toxic agents.

At present, a powerful campaign is going on to acquaint people with the requisite education and techniques necessary to use these gases effectively against the insect world and without harm to themselves. Admittedly, this is hard to do, but it must be done.

At the same time, it is believed that at long last Man has found an answer to what unquestionably is his sole contender for the future supremacy of the world—nerve gases against the insects! With their vast numbers, their enormous fertility, and their amazing "instinct" (or whatever it is), the insects have long threatened to dominate eventually this Earth. This is not nearly so fantastic as it seems, for there are portions of the Earth today which are under the merciless sway of the insect ravagers, who destroy the crops at will and cause famine and destruction uncountable. Almost all—till now—poisons brought against them have proved relatively ineffectual, easily being assimilated or avoided by the insects. But the nerve gases seem to be incredibly effective killers doing their job with a fervor unknown to any other agencies—be they insect ant-eaters, rodents, snakes, or chemicals.

The invention of nerve gases may signify that the balance of power has definitely shifted to Mankind's side, and that the day of the ravaging insect is going. Certainly the nerve gases will start a chain of events which will lead to further research enabling Men to once and for all eliminate this merciless scourge. Then, perhaps, there will be no danger, as the poet has said, "of the insect crawling from the eye-socket of the last Man on Earth. . ."

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By Edwin Benson

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GIANTS OF THE EARTH

By Lee Owens

WAS EARTH ever populated by giants? Is there a basis in fact for the legends about them? No actual proof exists. There are only indefinite facts and assumptions of varying solidity. However, the traditions affirming the existence of giants are universal; and from a biological point of view they are a possibility, depending on an abnormal hormone secretion. Though we must take into consideration that for long periods this abnormality may have been considered normal.

In the books of the Aztec ruler Ischtlil-Tschotschitl, it says: "There is general consent that the giant Kinames were the first inhabitants of the country. They were truly horrible monsters, given over to ugly vices. They were the terror of all peoples..." Legends of the Maya state that the men before the great flood were giants who are now buried under the oceans, as are the Titans under Mount Aetna. The first age of the Toltecs, called Teal-tonathiuh, was one of earth-born giants who ruled over a second age of the fire, Tletonathiuh. In the third age, Eleka-tonathiuh, they were overcome by a new race, that of men who invaded the country from the east.

In the Saxo-Grammaticus, there is almost the same version: "Ages ago there existed three kinds of men: those of immense height and great stature, the giants; second, those of high spirit who possessed the art of prophecy; and last, the common man. These last had lost the arts of the earlier races—the power to change the body and deceive the eyes of men; but they conquered the other races, exterminated them, and became the masters of the earth."

In other words, the giant races suffered the same fate as all the old races. The Lemurians, the men of Rapanui, the Rmoahals, and the early Toltec tribes were men of gigantic proportions, then to fourteen feet in height. But they degenerated and vanished, and today no race of true giants is extant.

ALUMINUM NECROMANCER!

By Pearl Miller

MANY OF the important things on this Earth are humble. We don't usually think about basic weapons and tools, but their importance is tremendous. Fortunately, Americans have their eyes open for any new invention which will affect industry—and consequently their way of living. As an example of this, consider the way in which foundries—almost as old as Man himself—have changed in the last decade or so. Now foundries have become mechanized marvels, changing from grimy, dirty, inefficient sweatshops to light, clean industrial miracles.

Foundry work and casting are processes which have resisted mechanization very strongly. By nature, they seem to utilize work not easily adapted to the machine. But not long ago it was announced that a process had been devised for casting iron and steel into directly usable shapes just as the metal came from the refining furnace.

Aluminum, one of nature's most abundant metals is assuming a role of increasing importance. It is becoming almost as important as copper. But it, too, has been treated by the refining and then remelting process. But American engineers stumbled on an Italian invention which has been in use for a number of years in a small wire-drawing factory in Italy. This machine is an automatic mechanism for taking molten aluminum and directly casting it into a continuous bar of dimensions suitable for feeding directly into a wire-drawing machine. It is simple, efficient, and is exactly what the industry needs. As a result, we have such machines in operation already and industry is crying for more.

Driven by a fifty horsepower electric motor the machine turns out aluminum wire of large diameter at the rate of thirty feet per minute. Imagine the productivity of a battery of such machines! The future of the aluminum industry looks a lot rosier because of the invention of Ilario Properzi!

It might seem difficult at first to see how such a relatively small invention could influence the world greatly, but anyone having familiarity with the relation between industrial might and progress —and we all have that now!—can readily see how, by extension, a machine like this can change the face of the earth. Continuous casting is a process long dreamed of by many men; at last it appears to be coming into reality and the future in terms of goods and products is just that much enriched!

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SYMBOLIC LOGIC

By A. T. Kedzie

"A MATHEMATICIAN must wait twenty minutes for a bus if he does not like Mozart in the morning or whiskey in the evening...".

Does that sound like the statement of an idiot?

It really isn't. Actually it is the solution of a problem in symbolic logic—a branch of mathematics whose problems very often read like the outpourings of a madman. But there is method in this madness. Symbolic logic deals with the principle of extracting from vast numbers of inter-related facts, the essence of principles. This is neither trivial nor simple and it is of the utmost importance especially today when we live in a world overburdened with facts!

Such familiar things as income tax statements, legal torts and briefs, problems in physics and chemistry, problems in military tactics and logistics, statistical interpretations—all can be helped by symbolic logic. The method consists of taking each individual fact, assigning it a suitable symbol and then by familiar laws of the "...A is not B..." variety, isolating the relations between these facts.

When a problem contains only a few facts, the solution by basic reasoning is easy. When the facts become numerous and the factors so complex in relations, then symbolic logic can provide the method of solution.

The answer printed above is in reply to a very complex problem involving mathematicians, whiskey, Mozart, etc. It is only an exercise and hence has little real value, but in principle it is the same as any difficult problem which might confront a physicist or an economist. Symbolic logic, developed a hundred years ago by Boule and more recently by Brouwer, seems the answer to a mathematician's prayer. It is that.

An economist, for example, might desire to know what effect an increase of twenty cents per ton might have on the steel industry and perhaps the whole economy. Because there are so many related factors in such an apparently simple thing, he couldn't possibly hope to deal with the problem by direct methods. He must resort to symbolic logic.

In the event of further war the symbolic logician, really an applied mathematician, will come into his own. There are huge organizations already preparing for this eventuality. Aided by calculating machines and "mechanical brains" the symbolic logicians are able to solve almost anything from the probable destruction of a given number of enemy submarines to the probable number of pairs of long underwear needed in Alaska!

ROBOT WITH JETS

By Jack Winter

THE USE of faster-than-sound jet airplanes in military operations, and the promise of rocket propelled aircraft introduces a major difficulty. Flying at such tremendous speeds, human reaction time is simply not fast enough to recognize an enemy, apply the necessary corrections, aim the entire plane and then fire the guns at the required distance. For by the time the pilot has made his initial judgment, the enemy has already disappeared or succeeded in shooting him down.

To overcome this fatal failing, technicians are resorting to the only logical step—they are substituting mechanisms for nervous systems. In a phrase, they are converting the jet fighters to essentially robots, slightly stimulated by human beings. A new and complex instrumentation has appeared known as the F-5, and this ingenious machine does everything but take off and land the jet fighter. It requires only very slight human interference. The pilot must keep a circle of light centered on a cathode ray tube. Radar, motors, servo-mechanisms and hydraulics does the rest.

The radar spots the enemy, recognizes him for what he is, directs the plane with slight human assistance in the general direction, aims the guns, and then fires them when the proper distance between the two is attained. Naturally, it is not just quite that simple, but the F-5 is an almost human robot mechanism which relieves the pilot of functions which his mind and body are simply not capable of performing fast enough.

It is striking to note that as time goes on, more and more of the price and value of a modern military aircraft, jet or otherwise, is to be found in its radar and electronic equipment. Military people like to regard airplanes as flying "gun-platforms". There are many who already recognize the inevitable trend. Speeds and accelerations are becoming so great that the human nerve and muscle system is simply outclassed and is incapable of competing with machines.

Therefore, the solution is to substitute the machine, and this is being done. The stress is more and more on the guided missile, over and above the combat plane. About the only real conventional type planes seem to be bombers and transports and even the bombers will eventually surrender their sovereignty to vacuum tube guided cylinders.

As the Korean war has shown, the push-button warfare stage is not exactly right at hand, but it must be remembered we are not fighting an industrialized nation against which the machine shows its power.

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BRIDGING THE GAP

By William Karney

THE SURFACE of the earth is in a constant state of flux, with each geologic era bringing forth a change in the proportion of land to sea. Islands and continents sink and rise continually; lakes and vast seas dry up and become vast plains; mountains erode; breakers and hurricanes eat at our coast lines; torrents level the surface of the earth. Then, new peaks arise, sea coasts are ejected from the sea depths.

Thus, throughout eternity, land and water are in a battle for superiority. There are times when this battle rages fiercely; times when, geologically speaking, all is quiet. Climatic changes transform the Arctic and Antarctic into springlike paradises; deep in the tropics the snowfields and glaciers advance. But one day, this fight between warmth and cold, between continents and oceans, will be finished. And on that day, glacial cold will be the victor—a time when earth will travel about a greatly expanded sun and all life on the planet will be buried under a sheath of ice.

We probably have no accurate estimate of the gigantic volcanic activity of the early geologic periods. Thus, some 430 volcanoes are active at present, and comparatively speaking, they are mere dwarfs. The number of extinct volcanoes must be at least ten times this figure.

For the period of historic time alone, Humboldt discovered the traces of about 500 catastrophic eruptions. The estimate of prehistoric eruptions will multiply this number by many thousand. Even today in lands of pronounced volcanic character, such as Mexico, Central America, the Malayan Archipelago, catastrophes beyond the limits of the imagination are fairly common. But of the giant volcanoes so plentiful in the Tertiary Period, only a few now exist: Such as Kotopaxi and Mauna Loa.

The continents we have today were formed not earlier than the Tertiary

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Period. A few thousand years before historic time, the wide land-bridges connecting the British Isles with the mainland submerged. Twelve thousand years ago, strips of land bound Spain and Africa and Tunis and Sicily, and instead of the Mediterranean were two shallow basins, the Tyrrhenian Sea and an Ionian-Aegean lake.

Almost all present-day islands which are parted from the continents by shallow seas—the North Sea and Baltic Islands, the New Siberian Islands, New Guinea and a part of the island groups of Near East Asia—were connected with the continents by land-bridges until the latest geological epoch. There are always weighty reasons for assuming earlier direct connections between now distant segments of continents, when the flora and fauna, the fossils and recent materials correspond, and particularly when to this correspondence we can add identity of plant and animal life in the geological structure of the deposit layers. From these evidences geologists established the right to reconstruct interconnections and land-bridges of great or even maximum size.

MATHEMATICA

By
Russell Roman

LORD KELVIN, the famous British physicist is often quoted as saying something like, "Unless you can measure it and express it in numbers, you don't know very much about it..." He made that statement toward the end of the nineteenth century when physical science was beginning to rise in all its glory. And if anything, it is more true today than ever before. For what distinguishes science above all else is its quantitative nature. Numbers and more numbers...

But numbers in themselves are really not the vital thing insofar as scientific research and development go; what is more important is the ability to handle symbology—which we call mathematics. This art—and it is really that—is the touchstone of the modern scientist, particularly the physicist. Whatever the complex relation between symbols on paper and the real thing, it is the source of most progress. Mathematical ability—the tool of the theoretical scientists—is just technique—vital, it is sure, but still just technique.

The popularizations of science would have you believe that you can learn this or that thoroughly in "ten easy lessons." The bitter truth is far from that. Without a thorough mathematical foundation it is impossible to appreciate the complexitites of modern physics. To verify this, you need only examine an advanced textbook in any phase of physics from mechanics to nuclear physics and you instantly note that it is a maze of symbols with mathematical connections. That is the power of the scientific method.

Nor are calculating machines likely to interfere here. They are mechanical devices incapable of thinking creatively with symbols. True, they can manipulate numbers with tremendous ease and rapidity often beyond that of men, but when it comes to doing abstruse work with symbols, they are just as helpless as washing-machines, perhaps a good deal more so!

Right now the critical fact is that there are not enough who are grounded in mathematics probably because of its old reputation for tedium and boredom. Those who think that mathematics is dull are usually the victims of improper instruction. Actually it is an exciting enterprise and extremely pleasing aesthetically. Unfortunately this is not widely enough appreciated and so there is a shortage of men trained in the field. The future will remedy this. It is a necessity to have men who can manipulate symbols as easily as numbers. On them depends the future progress of science, both pure and applied—and the distinction between these two is lessening. Even engineers, as distinguished from scientists, find it necessary to acquire more mathematical knowledge in order to be able to design machines and equipment properly.

On still lower levels in our civilization of growing complexity, the ability to handle numbers and symbols is of increasing importance to everyone. We all share in the heritage of the machine age. As time goes on we become more deeply involved in scientific practices and results, whether we want to or not.

Mathematics really makes the world go 'round!

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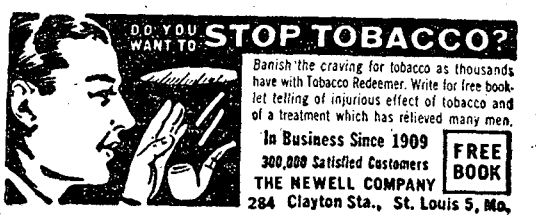
MEN BEHIND FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

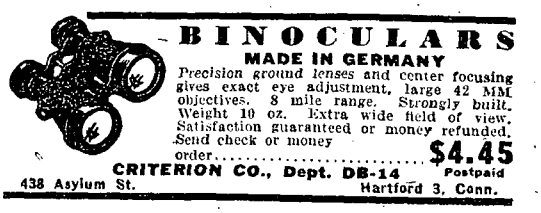
(Continued from second cover)

is the end product of years and years of high-church Anglican functionaries; my great grandfather was Bishop of Quebec, my maternal uncle, the Archbishop of the West Indies, and there are a baker's dozen of ministers in my immediate family. My father is a business man from a clan which settled in this country in 1640.

I went to school for my first four years in a veddy social private school on Staten Island, then went to Philadelphia where I was advanced half a year in a public school there. I finished the last half of the fifth grade and the first half of the sixth fairly honestly, and then went to a boarding school in Gettysburg, where in a year I learned how to smoke, swim, gamble, and cuss. Then I finished the last half of the eighth grade in summer school and was deposited, trembling, bewildered, underweight and aged twelve, in an enormous education factory called Overbrook High School. Its 4700 students were processed on three shifts, and the organization of classes and subjects was a direct carry-over from the grade schools which I had not attended. Everybody knew what to do about everything, except for me, and I was no end astonished. I remained astonished for six years.

I managed to flunk every single subject I ever took at one time or another, without exception. I had a sole interest—apparatus gymnastics. I was going to finish school and get an athletic scholarship to Temple, and would do p.g. work in physical education at Springfield, and then I would go down to Sarasota and work out with Barnum and Bailey until I got





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to be a high-horizontal performer. It made like a blue-print. I went out for the gym team and gained sixty pounds in the first year. I became captain and manager and got my Temple scholarship and an honorary membership in the Philadelphia Turngemeinde and fourth place in the East Coast Championships in the AAU for horizontal bar. They all said I was a natural for the City Championship.

Then along came acute rheumatic fever, a 16 per cent heart enlargement and the information from a specialis that there wouldn't be any more gymnastics for Sturgeon—not in the last season or ever.

I suppose I took it as hard as any one might who had spent a third o his lifetime with a single aim which was suddenly to be denied. I went into a major flat spin. I finished school and won a scholarship in the Pennyslvania State Nautical Schoo and lied to the medical examiners and spent six months being a cay-det on a ship which had been with Dewey a Manila. She had steel sides and a wooden bottom. We tacked her by taking in all sail and turning her with the engines and putting the sails ou on the other side. She was painted white and burned coal, and most o the seamanship we learned was with holystone and soojy-rag. I quit after six months and got a job as a bona fide sailor on a coastwise freighter for fifty-five bucks a month.

I went to sea for almost three years. One day I worked out a way to cheat the express company out of a few thousand clams but, lacking the moral character to pull the job, I wrote it into a story instead. It sold on sight and I was so delighted to have my name in print that I quit my job, went ashore, and became a professional. They paid me five dollars for

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I sold the same outfit—a newspaper syndicate—one and sometimes two stories a week at the same price for about four months. That was my sole income, but I made it. Ever make a vegetable stew out of six cents worth of soup greens?

Then somebody brought me Vol. I No. I of *Unknown*, and I realized that this magazine and I had places to go. I sold my first magazine story there, and when I had about filled its inventory, branched out to its sister magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*. Since then I have sold to practically every magazine in the field. My current effort is neither my first nor my last for *Fantastic Adventures*.

In 1940, after a half dozen sales, I figured I was ready to be a pillar of society, and I got married. In mid-'41 I went to Jamaica in the West Indies to run a luxury resort hotel. In December, this country found itself at war, and in February I was working as Assistant Chief Steward at the U.S. Army air base there. Late that year I was flown to Puerto Rico to run bulldozers and power shovels in a rock quarry at a Naval base. In '43 the bases all closed down and, having been rejected for the third time by the service, I settled down to write again. Nothing happened.

I have two daughters; one was born in the first year of my marriage, and the second in '43, in Puerto Rico. Came the end of current resources, and I made a quick ten-day trip to the States to fire my agent, see some editors, and get a much-needed slant on markets. My ten-day trip extended to eight months and wound up in a divorce—and Flat Spin Number Two, which went on for about three years.

Now, I'm employed by Time Inc., and I'm the entire advertising-promotion department of all four editions

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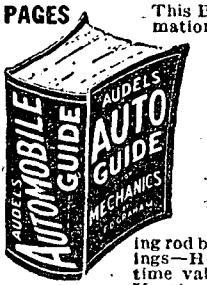

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of *Time* International. Where to from here, I can't say. Wherever it is, I'm sure it'll be interesting.

So much for the highlights. Now a word about what this has meant to me and my work.

I'm a blond blue-eyed Aryan Protestant with a profound distaste for the privileges extended to anyone for these accidents. I have experienced a sense of worship—lying under the stars in the Yucatan Channel—watching a rainbow by moonlight—watching a certain sunset in the Gulf of Mexico—in many diverse places, but never in a church, and I have seen some beauties.

I think that no one can achieve the stature of a man unless he has been unjustly hurt.

I think that the only important things are basic things; that basic things are always simple things; and that therefore complicated things may be exciting, or frightening, or amusing, or instructive; but if they're complex, by definition they're not important.

I believe in marriage, and see it as a sharing of everything capable of being shared, the stature of the marriage depending upon the number of things shared. But I also believe that where sharing is not possible, privacy is imperative.

I believe that the most constructive force in human thought is laughter *with*, and that the most destructive one is laughter *at*.

And I most sincerely believe that I am a member of humanity; that humanity's mistakes and stupidities are mine and have their weight on my conscience, and that by the same token humanity's achievements are mine; that therefore I deserve the privileges and am bound by the duties of this extraordinary species.

Theodore Sturgeon

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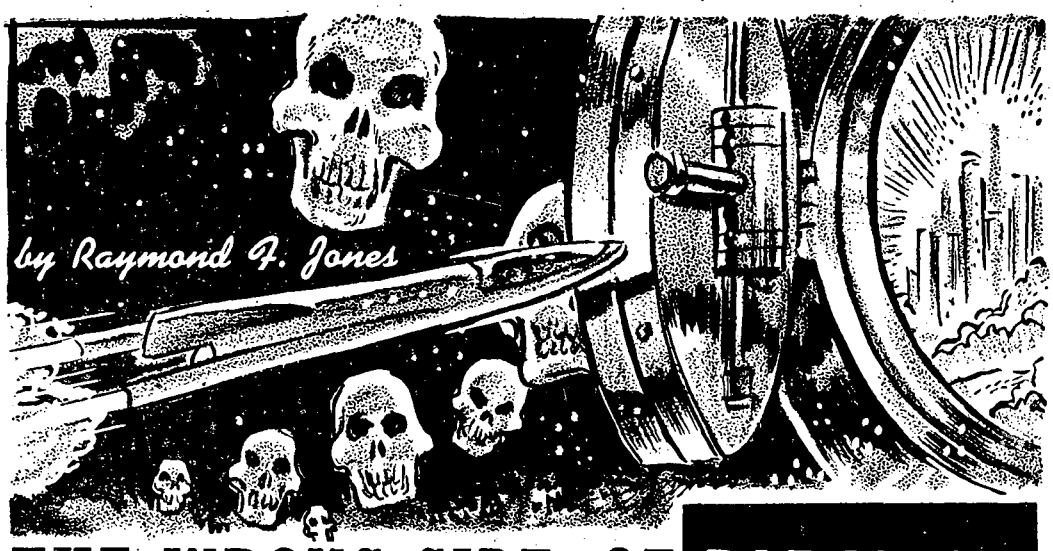

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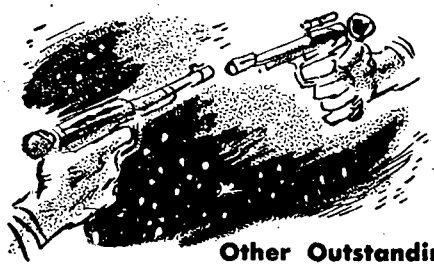

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